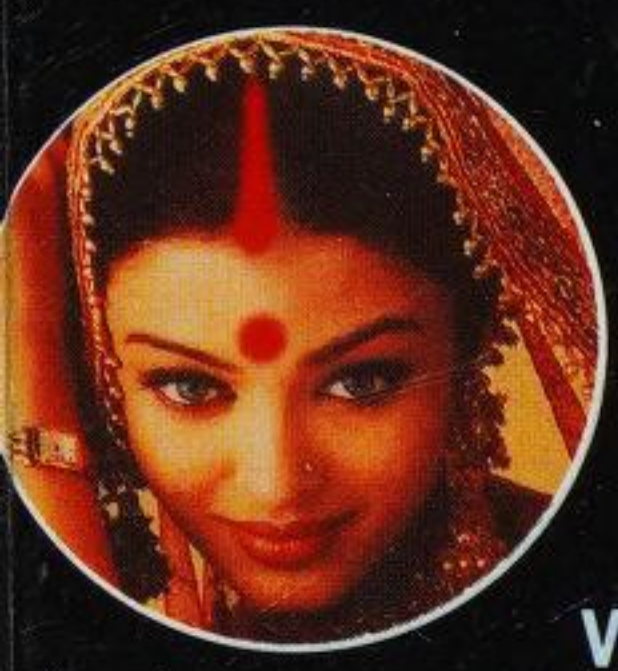
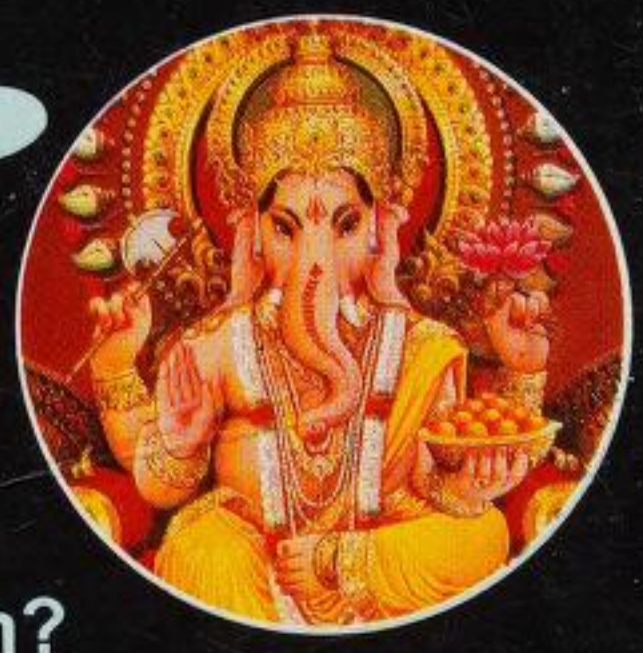
Why?

HINDU CUSTOMS, RITUALS AND RITES

Authenticated scientific explanations



क्यों?



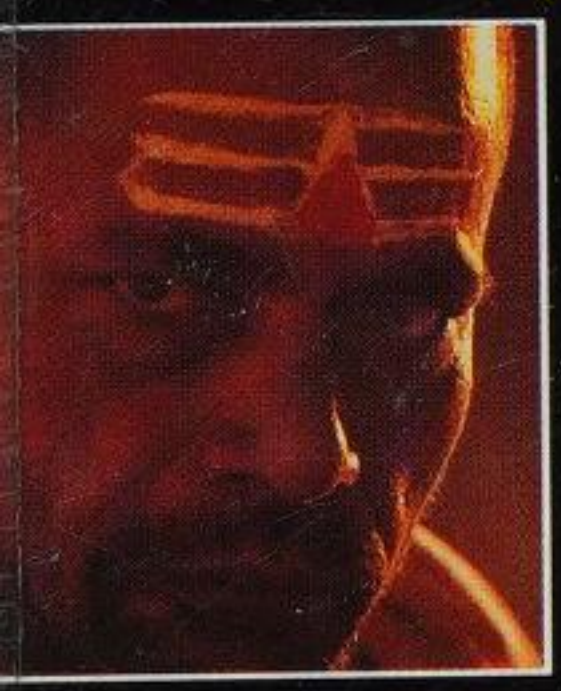
Why worship the idols?

Why is ॐ (OM) so significant?

Why is 卐 (Swastika) a good Sign?

Why do women apply vermillion to the partings of their hair?

Why is *Tilak* applied on the forehead?

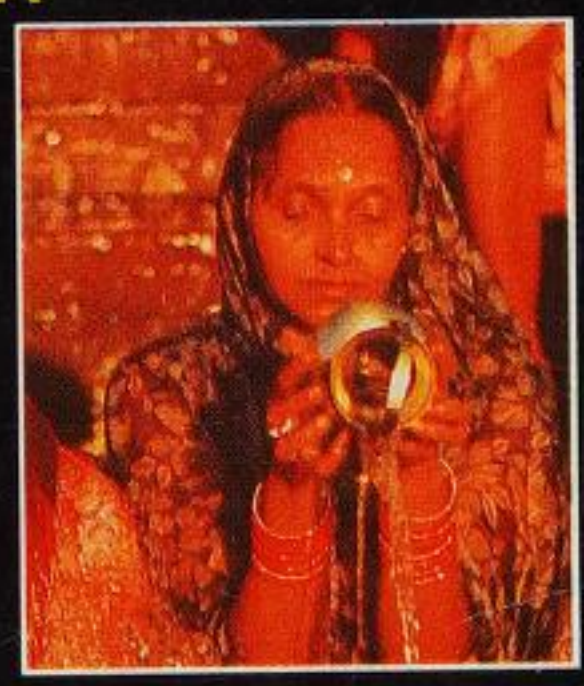


Why pour water to the Sun?

Why keep fasts?

Why is Ganga water sacred?

Why do *Pind-dana*?



Why is *Mangalsutra* Important?

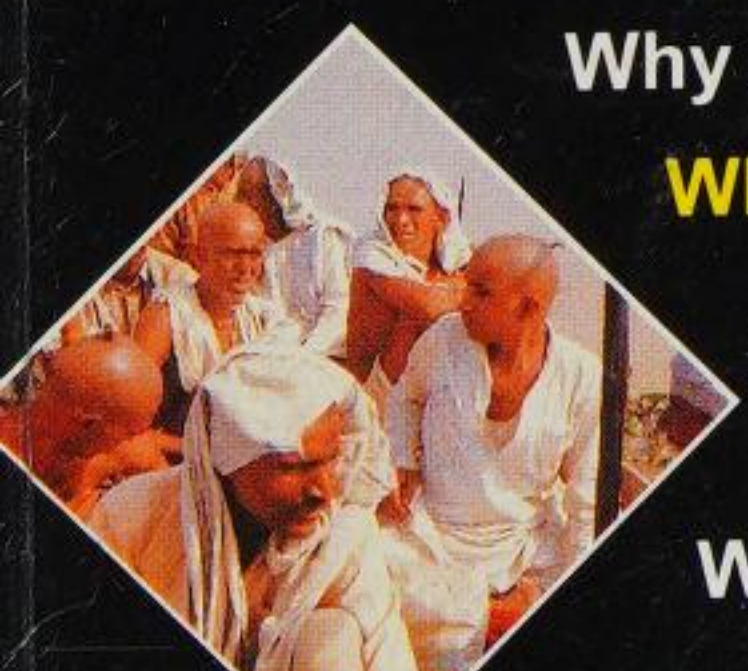
Why do groom and bride go around the fire?

Why Ganesha idols are consigned to waters?

Why Hanumana is applied with red Vermillion?

Why Moon-worship on *Karva-Chauth* night?

Why are *Tulsi* and *Peepal* reverable?



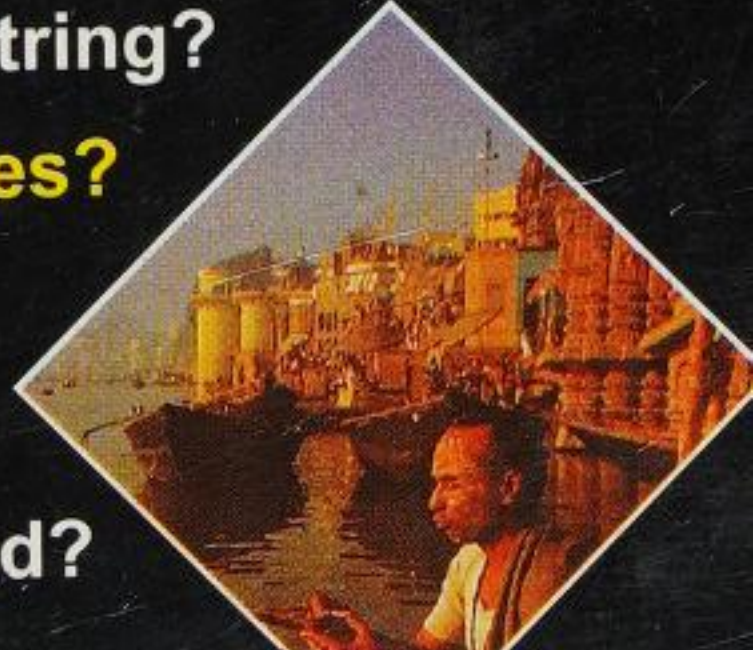
Why are there 108 beads in a string?

Why bells are rung in temples?

Why *Mundan* is done?

Why *Kapaal Kriya*?

Why *Shraddha* is performed?



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IT

WHY?

A unique book that reveals the sound logic behind Hindu customs and religious rites plus rituals.

DO YOU KNOW?

- ❑ How important the directions are for various religious rites?
- ❑ Why deity idols are taken rounds of?
- ❑ Why idols are worshiped?
- ❑ Why on *Mahashivaratri* Lord Shiva is worshiped at night?
- ❑ Why a *mantra* is chanted repeatedly?
- ❑ Why on *Navaratra* a virgin girl is worshiped?
- ❑ Why on *Ekadashi* rice eating is avoided?
- ❑ Why *Kumbha* festival is held at four centres only?
- ❑ Why on *Chaturthi* moon shouldn't be looked at?
- ❑ Why meals should not be taken during eclipse period?
- ❑ Why marriages between the members of the same *Gotras* (clans) are forbidden?
- ❑ Why tenth day after the death of a person is marked for special observation?
- ❑ Why *Mahalaya* phase is not suitable for auspicious works.

READ AND KNOW ALL ABOUT IT

WHY?

'Why' is the root of curiosity
Out of it grows the tree of sciences and knowledges.
'Why' is the bridge between a teacher and his pupil.
It's pupil's tentacle to touch his guru.
'Why' is infinite and limitless like God.
It is the hook to catch on
to avoid drowning in the sea of doubts.
Without 'Why' the wisdom will die.
Perhaps, that is why the creator has laid out '?' in the space in the form of Saptarishi constellation.
'Why' is the spirit of progress,
'Why' is the mother of knowledge,
And 'Why' is the neon sign that shimmers in the darkness of ignorance.
The very secret of the success is
Why? Why?? Why???

Why?

The answer to all the Questions regarding Hindu customs and bliefs

Author
Pt. Kisanlal Sharma

English Version
Igen B.

Manoj Publications

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Publishers

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761, Main Road, Burari, Delhi-110084
Ph: 27611116, 27611349, Fax: 27611546
Mobile : 9868112194
E-mail : *info@manojpublications.com*
Website : *www.manojpublications.com*

Showroom :
Manoj Publications
1583-84, Dariba Kalan, Chandni Chowk, Delhi-6
Ph. : 23262174, 23268216, Mobile : 9818753569

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ISBN : 978-81-8133-993-5

Fifth Edition : 2008

Maharani **Emporium**
1417, Gerrard St. (East)
Toronto Ont. M4L 1Z 7
☎ (416) 466-4486

Jai Maya Offset
Jhilmil Industrial Area, Delhi-110095

WHY : Pt. Kisanlal Sharma

THE INTRODUCTORY PREFACE

Shastra (or scriptures), the very word brings to our mind the three concepts. The first concept is about *Dharma,* the religious duty. The second is knowledge and the third is social code. The *Shastra* is the amalgam of all three having the *Dharma* as the basic ingredient.

Dharma Shastras are the codified sum total of the wisdom and knowledge culled from the analytical and thinking brains of great sages and scholars of the era of pure nature before the evolution of the culture of the synthetic improvisation. It was the first attempt to explore the truth. So, *Dharma Shastra* is science, the original scientific endeavour. It also defines the rulers and the ruled besides ordering social codes of conduct. *Dharma Shastra* thus, is also a constitution.

A constitution and the penal code, although is in elaborate written form yet it requires experts and lawyers to interpret various clauses, provisos and stipulations for the practical application of the laws. And the judge is expected to hear the interpretations and give verdict using his own impartial conclusions. Similarly *Dharma Shastra* needs scholars and appointed professionals to interpret its provisions. The laws undergo constant changes through amendments to remain in tune with the ever changing situations and conditions. *Dharma Shastra* faces the same challenge. So, it also justifies and accepts newer interpretations of its *sutras* (clauses) to meet the demands of contemporary political and social realities.

The changes in *Shastra* in itself is a law or a definite process. Systematic criss-cross patterns of threads weave a cloth. Similarly *Shastra* is woven by threads of constant, variable and period values of mankind. The constants are there eternally in set pattern. They don't change. But the variable and period values go on changing according to the situation. In *Shastra* format *yajnas*, charity, penance, *karma*, learning etc. are constant values. But the form and the process of their applications are subject to changes.

In ancient times for learning a student was required to go and live with the teacher. In middle ages schools, universities and hostels came up. In modern age the learning is carried through primary, middle, high, college and post graduate education systems. Similar is the case with *yajna*, charity, penance, *karma* etc. As constant values they are eternal. Only the process can change. Sometimes changes are accommodated by expansion or extension of the meaning of *sutras,* for example, the extended meaning to *yajna* given by Lord Krishna in Gita allows us to take even the modern act of dieting also as a *yajna* because here a person through that act is burning the possibility of unwanted fat in the fire of dietary austerity. But often the constant values have been shifted to serve the cause of some vested interest. It led to the bastardisation of *Shastra* giving birth to corrupt sects.

The shallow knowledge of *Shastra* resulted in the people individually or collectively committing excesses in *yajna, karma*, sacrifice, spiritualism etc. for selfish motives. So, to fight such corrupt tendencies

sages have taken birth from time to time. To cleanse the society they preached corrective values and their thoughts evolved into new religions that attracted good numbers of followers because of their reformist values. But over the period of time they degenerated because they were not built upon the foundations of the constant values.

Those new messiahs took their followers into the shining path that actually led to a dark tunnel of confusions. Consequently the society paid the price. Some of the intelligent followers realised the mistake but there was no way for them to redeem the situation. *Dharma Shastra* has introduced several customs and traditions inadvertently that proved harmful in the long run. Some who knew it could not summon courage or found support to change them. Social reformers blindly attack those customs and traditions hurting in the process the constant values, faith and the very elemental noble principles. They do more damage than good.

Thus, for a long time man has suffered the materialistic and selfish systems. So, as advised in Gita, it is time for introspection. The introspection reveals the distortions created by induction of wrong traditions and social evils in the variable or period values overlapping the fundamental and universal constant principles. It is essential to understand the forms of constant and variable values.

For example, a man and a woman tie the knot in traditional ceremony ordered by the *Shastra* to empower the marriage institution for the creation of a

civilised society. It is an essential constant value. Regional marriage customs represent variable values. When these customs are logical, pious, good intentioned and noble then both the values are in harmony and the *Shastra* so created works in the benefit of the society. Today our society needs the creations of an honest *Shastras* which retain the basic elements of faith and sublime constant values in such a way that it fits into the parameters of the laws of physical science and the modern realities. Such a *Shastra* should lead to the composite progress of the human society.

The ignorance of constant and variable values result in erroneous distortions and degenerations. These distortions carried through by generations become traditions which in turn earn the respect of being tested values solemnised by time. That makes them look like authentic parts of the *Shastra* and the society suffers from irreparable damages. Such a corrupted society degenerates in thought and deed.

The distorted customs and traditions eat into the vitals of the social values like viruses which can only be destroyed by the modern education used as antibiotic. Such customs carried forward by blind faith when reach the untenable limits then we think of putting them to scientific test. But in doing so social science, psychology and para-science must also be taken into consideration and given due weightage. The intelligentsia and logical minded religious scholars are trying to correct the distortions in the religion with the help of all the scientific testing grounds. In such a back ground is this analysis and the conclusions based.

Shastra is not taken here in the narrow religious sense but it encompasses wider social implications, civilisation, mass traditions, customs and general practices. Because a *Shastra* is shaped by various processes at different times. A person's habit or style might be copied by the members of his family and it can evolve as a family trait. The same trait when accepted as a fashion by others becomes a custom of that group. Its wider acceptance makes it a social tradition.

When the tradition is recognised by the intelligentsia, thinkers and the paragons of the society as a trade mark it becomes one of the features of that civilisation. These features change according to social, cultural and topographic environments. Especially time wise when a period provides distinct standard of living. When social science, psychology and para-science are in agreement with the tradition it becomes a religious custom. When the custom is positive for the culture and religious traditions it automatically becomes a religious order. These orders when pass the test of the scientific logic they become standard yardsticks. Such yardsticks are compiled as *sutras* to become *Dharma Shastra.*

The close study of the process of the evolution of *Shastras* reveal that the constant values do not change. Only the variable and period values keep undergoing changes. In such a scenario *Shastras* can only be created by determining the constants and the variables. Keeping the variable values in view the *Shastra* creators keep a lot of provisions, exceptions and conditions appended to *sutras*. For example, a woman

in her period can't do any religious work but on eclipse day she can do worship after a bath. In illness or love sickness the bath is forbidden. Just as amendments are drawn when an Act is passed to deal with the new situations, similarly when a *Shastra* rule is followed the sub-rules that have to be kept in mind.

One must follow *Shastras* only after studying rules, sub-rules, exceptions, conditions and provisions to get full benefits in this world and the other. Without the provisions for penance and reliefs the entire *Shastras* would become a misconduct. The society would be crushed between dogmatism and the guilt of misconduct. So, the reliefs of the penance and provisions provided by the *Shastras* must be judiciously used and the benefits reaped.

But indiscriminate provisions, exceptions and conditions weaken the foundations of *Shastras*.

Many a time the penances and the reliefs are not granted by *Shastras* but are introduced by unholy elements for vested interests. It creates very unsavoury situations and brings a bad name to the religion. Suppose a *Shastra* prescribes a penance or a worship or fast for a sin and the interpreter adds to it some provision of his own to derive material benefit for himself then the *Shastra* looks like a fraud and the thinking people begin to hate it.

Sanatana Hindu Dharma is not only about *Karma* theory but it preaches spiritualism and four pronged endeavours namely *Dharma, Artha, Kama,* and *Moksha.* That is why the creation of *Dharma* according to periods underwent period evolutions. At the times of

changes in the culture and the society human character also evolved elements of the development. But due to several reasons this evolution got narrowed down to *Karma* of valueless kind. *Karma* degenerated into the end game from being the means for sublime goals.

Karma is manual input for purification of mind. The people forgot it. The thinking that life was for *Karma* distorted *Karma* into the means of ego boosting. It proved a road block in the path of spiritual development. Whenever such degeneration led to the stage where society seemed lost in purposelessness and on the verge of disintegration some saint arrived on the scene to redeem the mankind and save the situation. Gyaneshwara, Tukaram, Ramdas, Kabeer and Guru Nanak are the stellar examples. The degeneration got a check. The people realised that *Karma* was meant for the purification of the mind. The relevant changes were introduced into *Shastra* accordingly.

Infact we can not ignore the psychological impacts of thoughts on individual and collective levels. Often there is a great chasm between the individual and social mindsets which can only be filled with pious religious conduct. Pious thoughts give shape to the desired mindset. It begins to understand the good and the bad elements of life and beyond. So, *Shastras* set separate rules for different types of mindsets. Several fasts are prescribed for the collective keeping in the fashion of a public ceremony.

Example : During *Satyanarain Katha* the process of *Katha* recitation, prayer, *mantra* chant, offering, distribution of *prasadam* and then, mass feast creates a

very pious atmosphere. Individual *pooja* or prayer fails to create that atmosphere and feeling. That's why *Shastras* give as much importance to pious talk, unity and mutual respect during *pooja* as to the fruits of the collective *pooja*. Some sects give utmost importance to mass prayers and the members of those sects consider it their prime religious duty to participate. On Friday Muslims offer *Namaz* collectively in mosques. Christians pray together in Churches at Sunday Mass as their religious duty. But Hindu's don't get together at temples for mass prayers. Only a few casual members sit at *aartis*.

Religious conduct makes the mind strong and the morale gets boosted. A religious person faces the adversities courageously. His nature is channelled towards goodness and noble deeds. Failure is not the lot of the strictly religious in true sense. And the success does not go to his head, Hence, his life is free of tensions, mental disorders, sensory pressures and evil ideas. A firm believer in God although can not prevent a mishap yet he does save his mind from the adverse affects of that mishap.

While discussing *Dharma Shastras* what troubles our mind is the 'fear factor'. Its presence in the religious conduct is no good sign. The fear of gods and goddesses dishing out hellish punishments to the defaulters makes the devotion spurious, harmful precedents are set, the religious conduct becomes obscene and it is beset with conspiracies of the vested interests. The true devotion is born out of love and faith. There is no place for fear. Minor gods and goddesses are merely fragments of Power Supreme

God. A fearless religious conduct is pious, peaceful and soul satisfying. The fear breeds negative factors which can only harm individuals and societies. Today several such fear generated traditions and customs are ravaging our social and spiritual fabric.

And at worship places the increasing numbers of gods and goddesses are creating management problems. It is leading to the erosion of devotion and faith. Still following the guideline of *Shastras* limiting their numbers is not being considered upon. No one is caring or daring to because of the ignorance about the proper 'idol consignments into waters' process. The common man is afraid of consigning the worship idols which results in physical inconvenience and psychological traumas. These fears are further fanned by orthodox priests who are short on religious knowledge. If any thing wrong happens these priests have several explanations to fool the ignorant clients.

In following *Shastras* ordered religious conduct the biggest hurdle, is society's cynicism born out of ignorance. There is a harmful tendency of hanging on to the cyncial beliefs even after learning about the truth. For example *Shastras* order a special menu for *shraddha* meals. But if those menu items are consumed on any other day it is not taken to be a *shraddha* day. If this belief persisted with an air of ignorance is spread and it continues to blow. The rites connected to death, last rites and *shraddha* appear in distorted form. Even a Brahmin going along with an urn meant for *yajna* creates a scare and the people run away. They think the Brahmin is going to perform *shraddha* for a dead

person. While going to market for buying water pitcher people often wear cap or turban on the head, apply *kumkum* on the forehead or take something in their hands to advertise or reassure themselves that the pitcher is not meant for the last rites.

There are several other misconceived ideas practised as customs like serving salt in *thali,* not accepting *vada*, potato or *kokum* chutney, not touching the pitcher etc. It is not clear when such wrong ideas become customs. The religious scholars don't offer any clarification. But they forget that Gita says 'Thus *Shastras* is proof itself'. When the baseless and ignorance borne concepts, contrary to *Shastras* try to become a part of the society then its culture and the grace get eroded.

In religious conducts the induction of ignorant customs is caused by the changes taken place in past while following the rules of *Shastras.*

Example : *Shastra* forbids auspicious acts like marriage in the family for one year after the death of a parent. Because the departed soul remains in the ghost state for that period and the members of the family are not in the right frame of mind due to death. But the practice of marriage performed in the family during that period has become a reality which is not healthy. To justify the act some elders float the misconceived idea on their own that if the marriage is not held within one year then next three years also don't allow marriages. Thus many marriageable young people either suffer premature marriages or no marriage.

For religious conducts ordered by *Shastras* face

hurdles at social level and more hurdles at individual and family levels. It is influenced by the incidents of the past. If during any ceremony someone dies or some mishap occurs that incident is clubbed with that ceremony as its consequence or a side effect.

Example : Suppose some one of a family dies on *Gudi Padwa* day. That family would shun away for *Gudi Padwa* from that year. Similarly on any auspicious occasion or celebration someone dying will result in the concerned people or family setting their own rule in terms 'We don't observe this occasion in our family.' The people refuse to believe in the fact that it was merely a coincidence. Such illogical concepts affect the pilgrimages, *yajnas* and other orders.

This habit spawns a wide range of illogical minor customs articulated in words 'In our family married women deliver babies only in their parental homes', or 'We don't touch iron on Wednesdays', or 'Our tradition is not to go to Tirupati and Kashi,' or 'We don't cook *Khichri* in family kitchen,' or 'We do not prepare *Anarsa*,' or 'In our celebrations *shehnai* and *nagara*' are not played,' etc. etc. It is clear that in those clans something unpleasant took place while doing some thing connected to the referred things or places. Even scholars fail to erase such misconceived beliefs or traditions as the concerned parties stubbornly turn a deaf ear to reason. The women folk rise up in arms to defend those silly customs. And such customs make the society a butt of jokes. Such sub-customs can only be eliminated through strict enforcements of *Shastra* rules at religious level.

The demand of the hour is the religious conduct as ordered by *Shastras*. When *Dharma* becomes synonym of blind faith and blindly following it becomes a false show and an act of arrogance. The reformers claim to be *Sanatanis*. But the root meaning of the *Sanatana* carries an element of arrogance. Only the eternal and the most ancient are related to *Santana*. The showmanship and the arrogance are peripheral. How can they be eternal? The real *Sanatana* thought process is the need of the hour. If *Sanatana* life style and the culture is adopted it can lead to composite development of the mankind.

What really the *Shastra* does not teach needs to be chaffed out. To determine the real message of *Shastras* the scholars have written from time to time. In this effort the books *'Nirnaya Sindhu'* by Kamlakar Bhatta and *'Dharma Sindhu'* by Kashinath Shastri Upadhaya are really significant. Besides these Swami Vivekananda, Brahmosamj, Aryasamaj and Theosophy Movement too have made considerable contributions.

Since independence, apart from scientific research psychology and social sciences are also making good progress. Restructuring of a *Dharma Shastra* based on combined material of above works is challenging task. Yet several scholars are working in this direction; in this scenario even common folk are studying the *Shastra*. Our rationalisation of several customs and traditions should help you reappraise our cultural values, conduct and codes using your own common sense and the intelligence.

❑❑

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The importance of faith and devotion in life can not be denied especially in religious and spiritual contexts. But in this spiritual journey curiosity is also very important. Hence in Hindu Shastras 'Why' is discussed also with 'What' and 'How' in detail. Among the above three dimensions of curiosity 'What' and 'How' raise no doubts amongst faithfuls. But 'Why' troubles them because it smells of the doubt and the disbelief or cynicism. Other religions too have put strictures on 'Why'—whereas Hindu religion philosophises it in several ways and discusses it. Because the satisfying explanation can change the very mindset and the personality of the questioner.

Chapter-1

DAILY CONDUCT *(ANHIK)*

Hindu *Shastras* use the word *'Anhik'* to mean daily. A faithful's day is made by daily conduct, study, meditation, worship and prayers. Despite divergent views on many subjects *'Anhik'* enjoys almost an unanimous acceptance of its definition. It covers all the activities gone through the day from the waking up moment to the time of going to sleep. The daily conduct or *Anhik* has fortified the *Hindu Dharma* since time immemorial. As a soldier through daily parade

regime adds to his strength and fitness, in the same way daily conducts ruled by *Shastras* enhance the influence of a personality. It is founded on *Dharma* and psychological facts.

Regulated daily conduct becomes a part of body and the mind. In the beginning it takes some efforts to become accustomed to a routine. But once it becomes habit one does not feel at home without doing it. *Shastra* has drawn a table for daily conduct according to time, place and limits in mathematical way. The benefits of the daily conducts accrue in proportion to the mathematical accuracy. In this respect scientific principles are not overlooked by *Shastras*. It provides valuable inputs to benefit the body scientifically and at the same time it works towards psychological upliftment of the mind. *Anhik* daily conduct is worked out keeping the above two vital factors in consideration. One who adopts *Anhik* with discipline suffers no addictions, diseases, mental disorders and poverty. If they do come somehow he is not afraid of them.

Anhik conduct provides adequate reliefs or provisions according to the demands of the time, place and situation accepting the inevitability of up and down cycles of life. The commitment levels to the *Anhik* is prescribed as full in one's own village, half in foreign lands and only a quarter in lands of alien language. The commitment is fully waived for the times of calamities and emergencies. Similarly complete commitment is prescribed for full health state and half for light illness. No commitment is required during *Sutak* (post birth or death week). Without such

relief the religious conduct would become a punishment or just irrelevant.

Some people consider *Anhik* a useless and unnecessary exercise which is not correct. The regular observation and exercise of some *Shastra* rules should not be a bother. A long stay at a big populated place is generally aimed at for roots and various other reasons of facilities. Even in metropolitan cities *Anhik* daily conduct is possible and easy. Only thing required is true faith in religion and interest in religious conducts. From ancient code books of Manu and Yagyavalkya era to modern *'Nirnaya Sindhu'* and *'Dharma Sindhu'* *Anhik* has been specially mentioned and approved.

Anhik and the conduct can not be separated. There is conduct in *Anhik* and *Anhik* in conduct. The two are so assimilated that they don't have any independent existence. Still the two are independently conceptulalised, it will so appear. The reason is that *Anhik* is based on religious values and conduct is based on physical scientific rules belonging to the fields of the physics, biology, anatomy and health. *Dharma Sashtra* made *Anhik* rules based on *Daivat Shastra* or spiritual aspects. Code of conduct is based on scientific laws. That is why most of the conducts ordered by Hindu *Dharma* pass the scientific tests.

The remarkable thing is that analysis of the Hindu codes of conducts were done more extensively in the western countries like United States of America, Germany, Russia and England. The Western world knows how effective these codes are barring some aberrations. The scholars reached at the conclusions

after very extensive research. The clauses had been compiled in scriptures in classified and categorised manner. Today several books are available that give detailed information on these codes. Here we use some of those informations in respect of *Anhik* conducts related to anatomical and medical sciences in this chapter.

WHY GET UP IN *BRAHM MUHURTAM?*

4 a.m. to 5.30 a.m. is called *Brahm Muhurtam* in Hindu *Shastras*. This quiet and peaceful period is exceptionally suitable for the study of *Vedas* or other religious books, yoga exercises and meditation. *Vedas* claim that such an early riser and user of the time for above acts stays free of physical and mental disorders. Such person has a shine on his physique.

Ayurveda considers that the air recharged by positive energy of moon light and enriched with oxygen given out by plants is a tonic for the health. A real nectar. So, this period is called *Amrit Bela* literally meaning nectar time. The air at this hour contains a healthy mix of 41% Oxygen, 55% Nitrogen and a mere 4% carbon dioxide. With the sunrise human activities start shattering the peace of the atmosphere and the spiritual pursuits which requires concentration of mind become impossible.

WHY STICK TO DAILY ROUTINE?

Seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, fortnights, months and years keep wheeling around us all the while. If we do specific acts at specific hours it derives

the benefits related to punctuality and brings order to life. We recognise its imperativeness by fixing business hours, office hours, public dealing hours, visiting hours and programme hours. Supernatural forces are active at certain times only. Apparitions choose post-mind night hour to manifest themselves. Only full moon charges specific types of psychopaths to go on their killing ritual.

Our sages realised that the time phases are influenced by different para-powers and energies. These powers or energies are symbolised by gods and goddesses. *Anhik* programmes the life to take maximum benefits from the time phases.

Saying prayers or *aarti* at regular certain hours is essential as that god or goddess power is more sensitive at that particular hour. And so is the case with other religious or spiritual activities of life.

A man who has set his daily activities to time routine does not have to consult his watch because his body responds positively to the certain activity at certain hour. After a time the body begins to trigger those activities on its own. The set habit sends impulses from major brain to minor brain at due hours to make the routine activities mechanical reactions. *Anhik* customs are not merely localised mechanical reactions. It is spiritual exercise, which involves harmonisation of body, soul and mind. Hence the impulses are not confined to major brain to minor brain journey. The impulses get transmitted to every cell of the body to awaken them. The morning *Anhik* customs are for contemplation, study, meditation, hearing of holy words and recitation etc.

Thus, *Anhik* follower's entire body is woken up or charged up which makes it more resistant to the diseases. Irregular *Anhik* follower does get the benefit partially. This regulation exercised in the morning orders the activities of the rest of the day too to follow in organised manner and in logical sequence to make the day more productive and fruitful. It lays the foundation of physical and spiritual progress and success.

WHY RECITATION IN THE MORNING?

Shastras order contemplative recitation in the morning to stabilize the mind and set it in religious direction. A name represents a character and its achievements plus glory. The recitation consists of references to the past great ones who glorified their names with their noble deeds. These names inspire the emulation of their endeavours. For the same reason the children are advised to read biographies of great men. *Anhik* custom does it by a brief reference as the deeds of the referred ones are already known to *Anhik* followers. The following are referral couplet as prescribed by *Shastras* for recitation:

Punyashloko Nalo Raja Punyashloko Yudhishthira
Punyashloki Cha Vaidehi Punyashloko Janardhana.

I bring to my mind the holy names of King Nala, Yudhisthra, Sita and Janardhana.

Ahalya, Draupadi, Sita, Tara, Mandodari and,
Panchakam Na Samaranityam Mahapataka Nashanam.

Ahilya, Draupadi, Sita, Tara, Mandodari—these five names are sin cleansers.

Prahlada Narada, Parasharapundarik, Vyasambrishashooka, Shaunaka Bhismadalyana, Rukmangadarjunavashishta, Vibhishanadeen punyanimana, Parambhagyawatanmami.

Prahlada, Narada, Parashara, Pundarika, Vyasa, Ambrisha, Shuka, Shaunaka, Bhishma, Dalya, Rukmangada, Arjuna, Vashishta and Vibhishana—I pay obeisance to all these God faithfuls.

Dharmavivirdhyati Yudhishthira Keertanen.
Papam Pranashyati Vrikodara Keertanen,
Shatrurvinashyati Dhananjaya Keertanen,
Madri Suto Kathyatam No Bhavanti Roga.

Yudhishthira's name inspires the growth of *Dharma,* Bheema's name cleanses sins, Arjuna's name is the destroyer of enemy, Sahdeva's and Nakula's names keep the diseases away.

Ayodhya Mathuramaya Kashi Kanchi Avantika Puridwaravati, Chaiva Sameta Moksha Dayika.

Ayodhya Mathura, Maya (Haridwar), Kashi, Kanchi, Avantika and Dwaraka—these seven holy places open the doors to *Nirvana.*

Manum Samarmayadi Gurum Prajanam Bhagiratha Dheermuda grayathnam.
Bhoopom Harishchandramabhawamwacham.
Shriramchandra Raghuvanshasuryam.

The original guru of the mankind Manu, ever endeavouring Bhagiratha, truthful Harishchandra Raghuvansha star Ramchandra— I remember them.

WHY LOOK AT PALMS IN THE MORN?

Mentally recite about couplets/quartets and bring both palms together viewing them and recite—

'Karagrey Vasate Laxmi, Karmadhye Saraswati, Karamule Tu Govind, Prabhate Kardarshanam.

In the tipwards of the hand lives Laxmi, in the centre resides Saraswati and at the bottom part the Lord of the world.' So, read the couplet while looking at your hands.

Hand is the symbol of *Karma*, the deeds. To accomplish a deed finance and knowledge is required. Laxmi and Saraswati are goddesses of riches (Finance) and wisdom (Knowledge) respectively. Lord Vishnu is the provider of all. So, the doer of the deeds, hand represents all the above deities symbolically. Having a look at the hand is thus, visually getting linked up with divine forces to seek inspiration for noble deeds.

WHY THE PROVISION OF AUSPICIOUS SIGHTING?

The third prescribed act of *Anhik* is setting the eyes on auspicious objects. The theory behind it is that good begets good besides the psychological effects. A man who sees in the morning a pious person, graceful lady, cow, fire or priest is motivated into doing good acts or his spirit gets a lift. They put one in good mood to think positively at least for the day.

Please remember that the cow is not the obsession of Hindus only but it is the symbol of meekness and simplicity also. The fire inspires one to get fired up to meet the challenges of the day. On the contrary the

sight in the morning of an evil person, bad woman, drunkard, naked one and sarcastic person puts one in negative mood and the whole day is spoiled by that.

WHY SYMBOLIC BATH?

Daily bath is a must, so rule *Shastra*. But in times of illness, being abroad or unavailability of water makes it impossible to take bath. The *Shastras* realised this fact and prescribed symbolic or dry bath for such situations. The symbolic bath is also suggested after coming home from outside, before and after meals, after hearing unpleasant talk, after mourning, after wailing and after going through a foul mood.

Symbolic bath consists of washing only face, arms, legs and gurgling. Don't towel hands before eating. Let them dry in air. Don't touch anything else but food. After eating out don't wipe hands with hotel towel which could be used by others. Use dryer.

There are four other kinds of symbolic baths recognised—*Upsnana, Mantra snana, Gayatri snana and Tirth snana*. *Upsana* is wiping the parts of the body with wet cloth. Then clean dress is put on. *Mantra snana* consists of reciting the *'Apohishta' mantra* in the prescribed manner. It is done in the evenings. Sprinkling the body with *Gayatri mantra* invoked water is called *Gayatri snana. Tirth snana* is applying to a deity idol the paste of prescribed holy trees or plants like *tulsi, beal, durva, darbha* etc.

Besides these rubbing ashes on the body is *'Vayu snana'*. Sun bathing is *'Saur snana'*. Beaming mind into Lord Vishnu is *'Vishnu snana'*. During

Mansarovar pilgrimage one can do with symbolic *snana.* But normal bath is required for fasting, *pooja,* and *Shraddha* rites.

Shastras rule that lunch should not be taken without bath. After taking meals no religious act should be done within the prohibited period of time. There are some more rules in respect of *mantras* in relation to bath.

WHY YELLOW ROBES FOR RELIGIOUS CONDUCTS?

A dress of special colour is prescribed for wearing at religious ceremonies like *Pooja, Yajna, Anhik* and *Shraddha* etc. Everyday dress was not found suitable for such special occasions where an atmosphere of sanctity was required to be created to mark a difference from the social occasion.

The colour and dress code has scientific logic.

The colour is a definite input to such an effort. That is why the priests of the different religions wear prescribed dresses on religious occasions.

Then, colour has served as an identity mark of various religions. Islam is represented by green colour, Hinduism is by saffron and the Christianity has opted for white. The flags of the nations also carry distinguishing colour patterns.

Although saffron is popular in Hindu religious ranks yet *Shastras* prefer yellow colour for religious ceremonies to separate them from the social festivals. The colour, religious symbols, objects and smells of *dhoop-agarbati* do combine to create a religious

setting and the air gradually begins to wear the feel of piety befitting a solemn rite.

Through what process the colour is decided upon is not known. But once it is prescribed by the religious authorities the faithfuls accept it as order of *Shastras*. Through tradition it gets sanctified by time to become a tenet.

For the same psychological reason the black dress represents justice, white dress medical services, olive green is military and the blue is for law (Police).

We can only guess. In Hindu religion *pooja* is a religious habit which involves offering of flowers. And yellow flowers outnumber the flowers with other colours. The flower effect could have played some role. Hindu religion accepts heavenly bodies as gods. And most heavenly bodies (Sun, Moon) look yellowish from earth. It could be another reason.

Shastras order clean clothes to be worn at the occasion of religious ceremonies. The silk and woollen dress is mentioned as the best suitable.

Thus, the yellow robes has the logical support of psychology in case of Hindu rites.

WHY GOLD-SILVER WARE FOR RELIGIOUS CUSTOMS?

Hindu Dharma Shastras lay extreme stress on piety and purity. It also applies in the matter of metals also and use of gold, silver, copper and bronze ware in the religious rites is ordered.

According to Ayurvedic medicine science the gold and silver have great medicinal values. It was gold and

silver *bhasma* widely used in preparing Ayurvedic tonics and elixirs.

This fact is also accepted and proved by the physical science. In space ventures pure metals are required. The choice naturally falls on gold and silver as metals of highest purity. In space crafts, satellites, space stations, space landing vehicles a wide range of components and the whole units are made of gold or silver or both. (Platinum is also rated as pure metal).

For the same reason of purity the gold and silver ware is so valued in kitchen and on the dining table. Some surgical instruments are also made of silver because it does not cause infection being a pure metal of required hardness.

So are many other scientific instruments.

Copper and bronze metals have one exclusive quality. Thick bottomed pots made of these metals lend a special taste to food cooked in them which can not be duplicated. They have this unique characteristic. And we all know that copper goes into making of electric wires being the best conductor of electricity. Theologists believe that copper is good conductor also of good vibes and positive currents of the very supernatural kind.

But sour foods go very bad in copper and bronze pots. Then, *Shastras's* don't approve of sour and spicy food which is considered evil generators. The copper and bronze urns at a religious ceremony keep such evil foods away because of this fact. The food brought in them is quickly consumed.

WHY GO AROUND DEITY IDOLS?

Religious scholars propound a theory that deity idols radiate a divine aura which is intense around it and becomes weaker as distance from the idol increases. Going around the idol gives the devotee a benefit of getting charged with that good energy. The mode of rotation is prescribed as from idol's right hand towards the left hand from frontal position. That makes it anti-clock wise rotation. The clockwise movement is not preferred as it is claimed that the divine energy particles and biological energy particles tend to come on a collision course. So, it is not a healthy act and spiritually unproductive or even destructive.

There is a very scientific explanation to rationalise this act. Rotation is the fundamental motional law of the universe. The rotation is the very basic act of creation. Satellites rotate around planets. The planets go around stars and in our case the sun. The sun along with its planetary rotational set-up called solar system goes around the centre of the Milky way galaxy. Our Milky way galaxy rotates around the centre of the universe. The very heart of the matter, atom is just rotational arrangement of electron, proton and neutron going around and around the nucleus. Thus, the going around activity is the very fundamental act of universal physical dynamics.

Hinduism sees the physical manifestation of God in all the heavenly bodies namely sun, moon, planets, constellatios, stars and galaxies. Sun, Moon, Mars, Venus, Jupiter, Mercury and Saturn are revered gods of Hindu pantheon as *Ravi, Som, Mangal, Budh,*

Brihaspati, Shukra and *Shani* respectively. All the stars represent various sages, angels, holy men and the other great ones of the past.

So, a Hindu faithful duplicates the basic planetary motion of rotation. Symbolically a devotee goes around his worship deity just like a satellite goes around a planet held on by gravitational forces. In this case the force is his devotion to that particular deity.

In this process he pays obeisance to the cosmic law of rotation.

WHY SIT ON GRASS MAT?

Shastras advise the use of grass mat *(Kushasana)* for sitting upon while praying, worshiping, reading or reciting holy books and meditating.

Kusha is a special kind of grass just about having right size and toughness to make a sturdy mat. The *Purana* myth is that once Lord Vishnu went into sea in the incarnation of Wild Boar to slay the demon Hiranyaksha. When he came out of the water he shook his body to shake off water and some bristles fell on the ground. Those bristles evolved into *Kusha* grass.

So, *Kusha* is considered sacred grass.

Some people even wear *Kusha* ring in the finger for good luck or for protection from evil. The mat made of dry *Kusha* is bad conductor which provides good insulation to the sitter against the ground. It protects the sitting person from losing body energy of heat or current by earthing process. In India the people mostly have to sit on earth. Even the home indoors have clay floor for sitting or sleeping purposes.

WHY *TILAK* ON FOREHEAD?

'Kathopnishada' explains about the mystery of *Tilak* from the religious point of view. We can see a vein prominently visible in the centre of the forehead which is called *'Sushumna'*. It points downwards and is believed to show *'Moksha Marga'*, the way to *Nirvana*. The rest of the veins spread in all directions but *'Sushumna'* always points in downwards directions. Covering the *Sushumna* bulge with *tilak* is supposed to trigger an inner process which helps spiritual exercise. Different sects put different kinds of *tilaks* according to their own faith.

In *Gita* Lord Krishna explaining yoga advises the yogi to concentrate his mind by focussing all thoughts at the centre of the forehead. If you close your eyes and concentrate your inner vision you will see a dot or an oblong mark right in front of your forehead where *Tilak* is applied. So, it has some implication to the concentration of mind and thoughts which has not been defined clearly so far.

There is body language science angle too to the *Tilak.* It is noticed that whenever a superior person conveys a grave matter or command to the subordinate he fixes his gaze at a point on the forehead of the person being spoken to. That point is where *Tilak* is applied to. Thus, the *Tilak* spot is mental gravity centre. When some one talks with his gaze fixed at that gravity point the other person naturally becomes serious.

As *Tilak* is applied after solemn prayers or *pooja* it becomes a mark of solemnity and a sense of piety gets passed on to the person it is put on. He gets into a mood

in which he won't like to engage in shallow acts. *Tilak* is also a signal for others not to indulge in cheap talk or say joker things to the person because he would be in the serious frame of mind.

Some people smear the body or forehead with ash before applying *Tilak.* The popular belief is that the practice is beneficial for the body and has medicinal value. But this claim appears to be stretched too far. The medical science says that ash closes the body pores affecting the skin breathing and blocks the sweating process. The idea could be that by not allowing the skin to sweat the *Tilak* can be saved from being messed up. But it is not advisable at all. At least your doctor won't.

But *Tilak* has the scientific logic.

WHY SPECIAL MATS FOR RITES?

Shastras prescribe some special mats or spreads for sitting during *pooja* meditation or praying. It was necessary because we traditionally sit on floor or ground. Furniture has not been in fashion except thrones for the kings.

The reason perhaps was the hot climate.

In cold countries floors and the grounds are ice cold or frozen. It becomes necessary to put a distance between the ground and the human bodies to preserve the body heat. It is best done by the use of furniture made of wood.

So, we sit on floors and several sitting positions we evolved in the course of time. For the conduct of religious exercises three sitting positions—*Siddhasana, Padmasana* and *Sukhasana* deserve

mention. The sitting position determines the direction of the flow of mental and bio-energy waves. The item you sit upon provides the base for it all and regulates the possible loss of energy in action and reaction.

'Brahmanda Purana' reveals the characteristics of *asanas* (the type of mats or any other seating item). According to it bare ground is discomforting, wooden *asana* is unfortunate, bamboo mat is very poor, stone slab is sickening, grass mat is inglorious, leaf mat is brain corrosive and fine cloth spread is non-spiritual. But wood, China clay and *Kusha* grass are bad conductors of electricity or current flow.

Ancient sages considered floor made of the mix of clay and cow dung, *Kusha* mat, deer skin, tiger skin on woollen piece of cloth as bad conductors but good for the spiritual exercise. They provide insulation from electric charges of earth. The sages gave top ratings to the skins of deer, tiger and the lion.

As today the wild life is protected we must not consider the use of tiger or lion skin. That practice is history now. Although there is no harm in mentioning that sages thought that the skin of black buck was pious and insulator from static electricity charges. The skin of the predators was considered to be insect repellant.

The conclusion is that *Kusha* mat or woollen piece of cloth is best suited as they are bad conductors of electricity and heat.

WHY KEEP *SHIKHA* (SKULL-TOP HAIR LOCK)?

Shikha has been recognised as sub-symbol of

Hinduism and separate guide book has been provided by the name *'Shikha Shastra'*. Manu has advised every Hindu to keep *Shikha* with due *'Churakarma'* rite. The *Shastras* orders that a calf-hoof size tuft of hair at the skull top be allowed to grow into a long lock of hair. In ancient times Brahmins used to have woman's hair long *shikhas* which they kept systematically knotted.

For quite some time the modern educated people took it for a meaningless dogmatic symbol of blind faith. But later some researches revealed that it had some relation to anatomical science.

Human brain has two parts—left and right. *Ayurveda* anatomical knowledge believes that from the joint of the two brain halves from *Ida, Pingla* and *Sushumna* points, a nerve originates that goes downwards alongside *Sushumna* vein. Spiritual science claims that *Sushumna* nerve is the bio-wire that is set alight when a person making penance gains enlightenment, or a researcher hits upon the idea of a new invention, or an explorer sights the land he sailed out for. *Shastras* claim that *Sushumna* nerve starts from the bottom of the body and terminates into *Brahmrandhra,* the brain centre which deals with knowledge, actions and desires. It is situated near where modern science locates the 'Pilian' gland.

Hence, for the spiritualists that centre is the most valuable and important spot of the human brain. It is just below the skull top where *shikha* grows up on the outside. Thus the idea was to protect the outside of that sensitive centre inside.

After all the nature had arranged for the hair to

grow on the skull to provide a protective cushion to safeguard the most precious part of human body inside, the brain. During pre-Christ era in India the shaving off of the head had become a custom when monk sects spread fast. So, *Shikha* order was re-inforced to save at least the most sensitive spot being shorn off the protective cover.

And it should also be noted that in ancient India it was a custom to sit under the trees to meditate, study scriptures or to do penance of long periods. The head or at least *Brahmrandhra* required to be protected from the objects falling down from above. The objects could be fruits, nutshells, dried seeds pods, broken branches or things spilled off by the tree dwelling birds and animals.

Some people believe that *Shikha* also served as an bio-antenna that could receive vibes and waves related to para-psychology. We know that the whiskers of cats and tigers infact serve as very effective sensory organs.

Shikha was perhaps hoped to evolve a similar capacity at spiritual level.

WHY WEAR *JANEOO* (SACRED THREAD)?

Janeoo or *Yagyopawita* is custom which bestows on a priest caste boy the right to study the scriptures and perform *yajnas*. It has a scientific background of anatomy field. A nerve on the back runs down from the right shoulder down to the waist. It transmits impulses. This fine nerve acts like mimosa. When it is in withdrawn form a person remains within himself in full control of anger or passionate reactions.

Perhaps, the sacred thread *Janeoo* is the outer reminder of that nerve to inspire a person to stay in full control of himself. Even in a Buddha statue of ancient period at Sarnath reveals a fine line across its chest which is believed to be the symbolic of Buddha having worn the sacred thread although he was against all pretencious acts of Brahmins. It also is considered a symbol of good health.

Shastras order that while urinating or answering nature's call the sacred thread should be hung over the right ear which is believed to have the special connection of nervous kind with the genitals. The thread is ordered to be taken off the right ear only after finishing the act and cleaning up properly.

Myth also claims the right ear to be the home of several deities because it pays greater attention to them or their stories. The deities listed are *Aditya, Vasu, Rudra, Vayu, Agni, Dharma, Veda, Aap, Soma* and *Surya.*

The sacred thread being put over the right ear while answering to nature's call can have a practical explanation as well. In ancient India the people had to go out in the open to answer the nature's call. A sense of urgency is involved in this act. It is a very natural function where an animal and a human are alike. The thread over the ear could be the conscious reminder to the person to hurry on with the unpleasant task as he is unfit for any other dealing of human life being in animal frame of mind. It could also be a signal to the others that the person is not to be disturbed, accosted or delayed as he is on nature's call.

WHY DIFFERENT DIRECTIONS FOR DIFFERENT RITES?

Shastras have determined that there are ten directions namely, East, West, North, South, North-East, North-West, South-East, South-West, above and below. The sunrise determines the East side and the sun set West side. The worship, meditation, study of holy books, yoga etc. religious duties are prescribed to be performed before noon facing the East, the direction of the sunrise. The similar duties in the evening are ordered to be done facing West, the direction the sun has gone into.

The sun is the very source of life in the solar system. In that sense the order is very sensible. The light is where the sun is. Where it is not there is the darkness, the symbol of evil and the sins.

Besides this, *Shastras* order West for charity and deity installation. During *Shraddha* North for the priest and South for the doer. North for self study, yoga and penance. East for father in doing caste rites and the reader while reciting *Veda*. While initiation East for the pupil and North for the guru. In marriages West for groom while performing *Akashatoropana* and East for the bride.

Many such orders have been determined.

Now let us view it scientifically. The East and the West are related to the sun and its energies. The North and the South are the poles of the magnetic forces.

From the dawn to the noon easterly space is charged the particles of the sunlight and the waves of positive energies sweep through our bodies awaking

the knowledge centres and the dormant spiritual conscience. Hence it is the perfect setting for the devotional exercises.

According to *Shastra* the god of death *'Yama'* resides in the southerly direction. So, the dead ancestors can naturally be in the South in spirit. When invoked they should naturally look Northwards where their living descendents exist. That's why a *Shraddha* performer descendent is ordered to face South where his departed elders should be, although it is merely a hypothetic logic.

But why should *'Yama'* be in the South? May be, it is earthly truth. South has been called down-under side due to its global positioning on the format of the solar system and our concept of directions. The 'down' is a pointer to the death. The old age is 'Down-hill' journey. We are 'down' when ill or defeated. Hence, it is our own thinking which reasons that the down is South which should be the end of the life. After the end, where shall we find ourselves to be? Down South, naturally.

It may not be the ultimate truth, but for us, the earthlings it is a fact.

In the marriages the groom faces East because he would need all the energies the sun would provide him. In ordering the bride to face West the basic fact is being acknowledged that a woman is the daughter of the darkness. She would be bold in the darkness but during sunlight she would be withdrawn coy and prudent.

Thus, *Shastras* order the directions considering the several scientific logics regarding physiology and psychology.

THE DIRECTIONS—GOOD OR BAD?

Shastras in detail have defined the good and the bad effects of the directions. Although the South is a noble direction yet common folk dread it because it is supposed to be the pointer to the death, the domain of the god of death, *Yama*. Even the scholars got affected and a euphamism for South was used as *'Awachi'* which literally means 'unmentionable'.

The serious consideration reveals that *'Yama'* the death is the most kind act that infact protects the very life from being ravaged by the ever increasing numbers of old and infirm, exploding population of humans and animals, epidemics and diseases spreading endlessly and all the creatures fighting for a living space turning the earth into a virtual hell.

'Yama' literally means 'Control'. So, he is the original population control project the very formula of healthy life, the sublime protector through regulation of life. In *yajnas 'Yama'* is duly honoured with a worship for the same reason.

In the local medicine system, the patient lies facing southerly direction. As the treatment starts the direction is changed to have him face north symbolically hoping that the patient no more faces the death. Although at the end eventually he would have to face it nevertheless.

Shastra does not approve of sleeping with feet pointing towards the South. There is medicinal science logic behind this theory. Every particle or the body of universe is attracted or repelled by negative or positive

magnetism. Every body is attracted towards larger body nearest. Each particle has its own speed and mode of rotation. The earth is under the gravitational force of Sun. The sun itself is subjected to gravitational pulls of the other stars, constellations and galaxies. These pulls effect the atoms of our bodies too. So do the atoms of the food we eat. The magnetic attraction is also there making parallel impact.

Sleeping with feet pointing northwards is helpful since the magnetic effect is opposite. If the feet are southwards repellant action begins and the body suffers magnetic turmoil which affects the digestive system adversely. It can also cause mental fatigue triggering nightmares.

WHY DRINK WATER IN SMALL MEASURES?

Shastra advise the intake of water by *'achmana'* which is taking water is small measures by merely hand cupfuls. It has been proved medically that water taken by spoonfuls is healthful and beneficial in comparison to the water drunk by cupfuls, glassfuls or mugfuls in one go.

Shastra rules *'Tripbed Apo Gokarnavard Hastaun Trirachameta'* which means 'Take water in hand-cup made in *'Gokarna'* style.' *Gokarna* style is pinning down the folded pointer finger with the thumb and keeping the rest of the three fingers opened out to make them look like a cow-ear. In that fashion the palm can hold only teaspoonful amount of water.

The raised part of the palm at the joint with the

wrist is called *Brahmtirtha*. If one puts his lips to this part and drinks palmfuls of water three times it is called *'Brahmtirtha achamana'*. Spills the fourth palmful into *Thali* by making it flow over the *'Brahmtirtha'*. This process is called *Achmana*. It is mainly meant for taking the water in small doses instead of gulpfuls.

And it should be kept in the mind that in the ancient times people drank water by cup of their hand in absence of glasses or bowls.

Shastra orders several religious rites to end or to begin with *achmana* which is supposed to be full of the divine blessing and health.

The scientific logic is that drinking small amounts of water acts as a catalyst to change the saliva production rate. Excess saliva produced helps in the digestion of the food and melts down the hard parts of the morsels.

Shastra advise *achmana* after waking up, on feeling hunger, after eating, sneezing, hiccuping telling a lie and studying. In all the above cases the healthy saliva production acts as a lubricant to the body machine. Telling a lie produces guilt feeling which upsets the rhythm of the body. Saliva in some way is supposed to inspire the body to fall back into rhythm by injecting the smoothness.

If *achmana* is not possible due to some reason catching the left ear-lob by the right hand is prescribed as the substitute action. The logic of it has not been explained so far. May be, it is a way of seeking pardon like the kids are made to do by the teacher when they err.

WHY *PRANAYAMA*?

At the time of *Yagyopawita Sanskaaram* the priest guru teaches *Gayatri mantra* and *Pranayama* to his pupil. Like many other customs it too has gone out of the lives of the people.

The priest just mentions about it but does not teach the process. It is now merely a formality.

Pranayama is a very useful process that teaches how to harmonise body and mind. It is very helpful exercise in the development of spiritual aspect of life for composite progress. The life subsists on three ingredients—food, water and air in that order of importance. Without air a person can't survive beyond a couple of minutes.

The air is inhaled into the lungs where the lungs take in oxygen out of it and dissolve the same into the blood. The air is inhaled through the nostrils where a criss-cross web of hair filter it through. The layers of spongy skin of lungs absorbs the oxygen. For efficient service the lungs requires to be kept well exercised.

Regular *pranayama* exercise keeps the blood well loaded with oxygen rich red cells which makes the body capable of working harder, faster and longer.

Pranayama is done in three acts—*Poorak Kumbhaka* and *Rechaka.*

Pooraka consists of filling the lunges with air as full as possible through slow inhaling.

Kumbhaka. In this phase one has to hold the air in lungs as long as possible without letting out any air.

Rechaka. It is exhaling of air slowly.

The most vital part of *pranayama* is holding in the air. Through exercise the holding-in-time is gradually increased. Some yogis through years of practice reach a stage where they can hold the air in for incredible lengths of time. A person trained in *pranayama* can remain submerged in water for abnormally long periods without surfacing to breathe in.

Pranayama exercise also teaches one the concentration of mind. Holding in air is such an exercise that a person has to stop thinking of anything else but keeping still in bottled up state. It is the other way around as well. If you can't control your mind you can't do *pranayama*. It demands your full physical and mental efforts. When a person reaches a state where he can hold in air mechanically in care of the minor brain he can employ the mind to some noble thought. It will be easy to beam the thoughts on subjects because over the period the mind already has learnt to do that.

That is why *Shastra* advise the faithfuls to beam into Lord Vishnu during *Pooraka*, into Lord Brahma during *Kumbhaka* and into Shiva during *Rechaka*.

It is also believed that God allots us life measured in number of breathings. So, through *pranayama* a man can make his life last longer by prolonging the period of each breathing.

WHAT IS *SANKALPA*?

Sankalpa is generally just a resolve. But a *Sankalpa* made in the manner of a solemn pledge with due *Shastra* ordered process becomes the real *Sankalpa* which deserves to be begun with capital 'S'.

In spirit one's honour is mortgaged. By fulfilling the *Sankalpa* one redeems his honour.

A broken *Sankalpa* hangs in the neck of person's conscience like albatross. This whole *Sankalpa* exercise is to add gravity to the resolve of a person. The ceremony is needed to add seriousness to the act. Western marriage are instable because they are not wed through a solemn process while Indian marriage is put through a series of solemn ceremonies to make the union last for ever.

Resolve is needed for every act because it leads to decision and then action. For religious acts an extra solemnity should be there as it is the matter of faith which should not be taken lightly.

Sankalpa involves place, time, creed, wish, the deity in whose name the *Sankalpa* is to be made, duty, nature of deed, time limit, the contributory sub deeds, obeisance to Lord Ganesha and pious words which means that lowly guttural words, expressions, double ententers are consciously avoided.

Sankalpa is spelled out with rice grains held out in one palm and with other hand water is offered three times. The rice is the symbol of integrity of the resolve and water symbolises the presence of the water-god, Varuna who in case of the default takes away any credit accruing for the partial compliance.

Shastra says—*'Anrite Khasuvaikriyamane Varuno Grihyati Apsuve Varnam'*—Meaning if *Sankalpa* is not true *Varuna* will take away the rewards. The presence of the water, thus, is a must to solemnise the pledge. But if somehow water is not possible to

have then one can hold in his hand a coconut or beetle nut as an alternative. *Tulsi* or *belpatra* can also serve the purpose. But it all will have the affects of dilution of *Sankalpa* because on the very onset compromise has been made which will cast a shadow on the coming events related to it as a psychological fall out.

RELIGIOUS *SANKALPA* TYPES

There are four kinds of religious *Sankalpas*:

Nitya, Naimitik, Nishkam and *Prasangik.* In *Anhik* custom *Nitya Sankalpa* is ordered in which *Sankalpa* is repeated everyday. The other kinds of *Sankalpas* are spelled out for rites that last for longer periods. The resolves for this longer version is called *Mahasankalpa*.

Nitya Sankalpa should be consummated by reciting the words—*'Anen Sankalpokt Falwapte Sankalpokt Sankarvya Paripoorteye cha'*.

The other kind of *Sankalpas* have their own processes and traditions.

WHY CHANT ON STRINGED BEADS?

It is tradition to chant *mantras* or sacred words a certain number of times or certain duration of time. In a meditative mood the entire attention is required to be concentrated in the act of chanting. Keeping a count of numbers is a problem. How to do it?

Measuring it on time frame is also tricky. One will have to keep an eye on the watch or hour glass which will be a distraction bad enough to spoil the piety or solemnity of the exercise. And the most meditators

prefer to chant with their eyes closed to avoid visual distractions and better concentration of mind.

The easiest solution was stringed beads *(Mala)* in a specific number to have a handy version of abacus which did not involve application of mind or visual attention. The end bead of larger size (Master bead) conveyed that the count was complete.

As the stringed beads became an accessory of a religious conduct its ingredients were declared holy material, customs of its use were made and the legends were created to sanctify it.

Customs : *Mala* (stringed beads) should be held over central finger and the beads turned downwards one by one with the thumb at every chant. The beabs should not fall one over the other. *Shastra* rule that the sound of one bead striking another would cancel the chant. When the master bead arrives the *mala* should be turned over. In no case turning process must continue beyond it. Do six *pranayamas* as penance if the master bead is jumped by mistake.

The *mala* should not fall on the ground. It should be kept at some sacred place along side the holy books when not in use preferably in a box of pure metal or wood. No two person must use the same *mala*. No one should lend or gift his *mala* to others.

Only a guru can gift *mala* to his disciple considering it the integral part of the education. While using *mala* it is advisable to cover the hand with a clean cloth. This provision is perhaps to keep the beads out of sight to prevent the mind from engaging itself habitually in guessing the number of the remaining beads to be turned over.

WHY 108 BEADS IN A *MALA*?

The concept of string of beads was naturally standardised by determining a specific number of beads in a *mala* to make it religious abacus.

But why 108?

May be, the number was to be kept around most calculation friendly 100. Does the extra 8 represent a cover for omissions and commissions just like the baker's dozen? No one can answer for sure.

The scholars explain it by linking it to several spiritual and religious permutations and combinations.

Theory 1. One stands for one God. Zero symbolises God Unmanifest. 8 represents entire creation through eight natures namely—Earth, Water, Speed, Space, Air, Mind, Wisdom and Ego. In this way 108 makes one conscious of this world, deified God and Power Supreme unmanifest.

Theory 2. A person breathes 21600 times in a 24 hour day. Out of the 24 hours 12 are spent in daily chores. The rest 12 are devoted to the thoughts of God as ruled by *Shastras*. Thus, only 10800 breaths are spent in the real spiritual exercise.

But human life is too busy. One can't spare so much time for meditation as the practical facts of life showed. So, the sages deleted last two zeroes from 10800 leaving only 108 for spiritual exercise.

Theory 3. One thought believes that the sun goes through 21,6000 *Kalas* (some kind of phases) only half of which, 108000 are positive phases. By omitting the last three digits we are left with 108. According to this

thought 108 beads of a *mala* represent one phase each of the sun.

Theory 4. The astrologers connect '108' figure to their own concepts. There are 12 birth signs and 9 solar planets (as ruled by *Shastras*). Thus, 108 is arrived at by multiplying the two figures. They think that it is the sum total of the fate of the world.

Theory 5. Astronomy sages have a different belief. The Indian sages charted out 27 constellations. Each of them goes through 4 phases in a year. Here 108 in the result of 27×4 which they consider a heavenly figure.

Thus, over the period of a long time all these beliefs became spiritual legends and the figure of '108' became a holy number and saints began to write '108' before their names as symbol of figurative holiness.

Exceptions : There is a provision for 27 and 54 beaded *malas* for daily chant and also for 25, 50, and 100 beaded ones. But these are very rare and rarely seen.

WHY CHANT ON *MALA*?

Chanting in an act of repetition. Now it is proved scientifically that the repetition has a soothing effect on the mind.

It is a changing world. All things are changing or undergoing constant changes all around us. Human mind is basically orthodox. It recoils from the changes and the change is the other name of the future.

The stunning effect created by the changes on the mind is called 'Future shock'. The people are ever

under the future shock as more and more changes are taking place at ever increasing pace in every field of life. Any repetitive act gives the mind a relief as it symbolises stability, a no-change feeling. For the same reason festivals and annual celebrations are the great stabilizing factors which assure the mind of the unchanged continuity. That is why the man clings to traditional rituals and festivities as they provide him periodic relief from the future shocks. The chant of a *mantra* creates the same feeling of the stability and one feels at peace.

The chant or *jap* are of four kinds—*Vaikheri, Upanshu, Pashyati* and *Para*.

Usually one begins with *Vaikhari* which is chanting a *mantra* loudly and clearly. Then, he tones down in *Upanshu* which is just a mumble. It dies down into a mental chant of *Pashayati* stage where lips may move but no sound is made. The last stage in *Para* where the chant is perfectly a spiritual exercise. Even the lips don't move. The *mantra* is merely repeated mentally without any physical manifestation yet his entire body and the mind participate in the chanting exercise. Even his breathing is saturated with *mantra.*

After the resolved period of chanting the mood and the mind remain stable insulated from the future shock for a period of time proportionate to the solemnity invested in the chanting exercise.

Even the turning of beads is repetitive act and hence soothing.

Shastra rule that 40,000 *Vaikhari* chants take one to graduate into *Upanshu* level. 40,000 *Upanshu*

chants promote one to *Pashyanti* level. And then 40000 *Pashyanti* chants make one fit for the *Para* sublime level of contemplative chants. The last level is guaranteed to be extremely blissful and full of piety.

Mala Traditions : There are a number of rituals suggested for the keeping, purification and the treatment of holy *mala*. There are also processes detailed for the worship of *mala*.

WHY EVENING PRAYER?

Hindu *Shastras* lay great stress on evening payers and meditations. It is an integral part of *Anhik* custom. It is believed that prolonged evening prayer blesses one with the proportionately long life.

Shastra has classified evening prayers into three time slots. Pre-sunset, After sun-set and Evening.

The purpose of the evening prayer is to cleanse one's mind and body from the after-effects of the mundane business of daily life. The dealings of the day-long practical life makes one's mind oriented to materialism. And the day's toil takes its toll on the mind and the body causing extreme tiredness. The Hindu philosophy does not want a man to extend his daily business life to invade into the family and the spiritual life.

The evening prayer with the family effectively separates a persons daily practical life and the family life. It acts like a spiritual curtain on the material life.

The evening ritual brings the entire family spiritually and emotionally together. A family ambiance gets created where all the members can feel the warmth of the love of the others.

Shastra rule that a person who does not say evening prayers is not fit for any big religious rite or ceremony. It advises 1000 *Gayatri Mantra* chants as penance for missing three or more prayers.

SANDHYA NORMS

Sandhya is elaborate prayer as prescribed by *Shastras*. *Sandhya* has 14 parts—Achmana, *Pranayama, Asana, Laghu Marjana, Mantrachmana, Deergh Marjana, Adham Gharshana, Arodhyadana, Japa, Upasthma, Dikpramana, Guru Vandana, Dev-Brahmina Vandana* and *Dwirachmana*. Out of the 14 *Achmana, Pranayama, Ardhyadana Japa* and *Dwirachmana* are essentials.

Shastras advise to go through all the 14 parts with due rituals. During the rituals *Gayatri mantra* is chanted 108 times or 1000 or more times.

If the time is short a 5-part *Sandhya* can be done consisting of the essentials.

WHY PROVISION OF *PANCHAMAHAYAJNA?*

Shastras rule *Panchamahayajna* to be a religious man's duty. It is a pentagonal *yajna* consisting of *Brahmyajna, Devayajna, Rishiyajna, Pitriyajna* and *Manushyajna*. Daily study of subjects of one's own line is *Brahmayajna*.

Then deity, guru and ancestors are invoked. The offerings in their names is made to *yajna* fire.

The whole process is called *'Vishwadev Tantra'*.

First the fire is set in the pit after invoking fire god with *vedic mantra*. After offering prayer to fire sprinkle water around the fire. Rice grains are placed in

the eight directions. A small amount of cooked rice treated with ghee is offered to fire. Fire is prayed to and a little ash from the fire is retrieved to apply on forehead. More offerings are made into the fire in the name of deity, ancestors and living humans. In the end a small amount of rice is placed outside the house.

*Shastra*s consider that in making food violence is committed which results in the death of a large number of creatures of insect and germ kinds. Because it involves burning fire, grinding, pounding, whipping, procuring water, cutting, tearing, peeling, filtering or sieving, chaffing, milling etc.

Pentagonal *yajna* or *Panchmahayajna* is supposed to cleanse one of the sin of causing collateral massacre. *Shastra* rules that a home where this *yajna* does not take place the food grains therein remains unseasoned religiously and are no good for preparing meals with for holy purposes, guests, nobles and for offering to departed ancestors.

This ritualistic exercise on the surface looks pedogogic devoid of any logic. But a closer look reveals that such ritualistic daily acts create a mechanical mindset which could be helpful in dutiful people although at the cost of the innovativeness and the birth of new ideas. And it is a fact that burning rice and ghee gives out an aroma that is very pleasing to the Indian taste glands which the Westerners can't appreciate. For the same reason, in the Indian cooking the *dal* is treated with the searing *Tadka* (condiments fried in ghee in a metal ladle) which make everyone feel good and hungry. The typical *tadka* sound makes everyone conscious of the readying meals which acts as an audio-appetizer. It is soul satisfying.

Leaving food outside the home is an effort in inviting the birds to help themselves to the sacred food. The birds have a special place in Hindu philosophy. They are like our souls and spirits that keep flying high in the skies. The soul has been compared to a bird trapped in the cage of the body. When the body dies, the bird is liberated to soar up in to the sky and further up towards the heavens.

So the birds become a part of the sacred rite.

Some people also believe that in *yajnas* process of making offerings to fire and burning of incense ingredients like *raal* and *guggle* purifies the air. It was more true in the era when fumigants and air purifiers and repellants were not there.

WHY INVOKE *'SWAHA'* DURING *YAJNA* OFFERING?

Purana belief is that when demons defeated gods they destroyed the custom of *yajnas* as well. The gods used to get reinforced through *yajnas*. Thus *yajnas* were the acts that fuelled the god forces. Hence, the *yajnas* are perceived to be the feeders and the charges of the positive energies or forces represented by the various gods invoked during *yajnas*.

In *yajnas* when offerings are made to the fire, the *mantras* end with the invocation *'Swaha'* which literally means 'ashes'. The offerings are wished to be turned into ashes. There is one more important aspect of this custom. *'Swaha'* is the name of the wife of Fire god. She is invoked because no major Hindu rite is sanctified without the presence of the better half. Infact Hindu philosophy considers 'power' itself to be feminine gender.

WHY WORSHIP *YANTRA?*

'Yantra' is a geometric figuration of a god or goddess which represents his or her powers.

In worship *Shastras* rule that with god/goddess idol, the related *yantra* should also be worshiped accompanied by the recitation of prescribed *mantra* according to *tantra* (specified process). The belief is that *yantras* carry the powers of the gods or goddesses they represent. The reverence shown to and worship or display of the *yantra* in itself is rewarding.

Is there scientific logic behind this?

There is. In the modern scientific age the *yantra* practice is integral part of corporate sector activity. The corporate house have their own *yantras* which they call 'Logo'. Every big business house has its carefully designed logo which plays a big part in its activities.

Infact, over period of time logo becomes the symbol of the quality of its products or services. Logo or emblem becomes a firm's stamp which is cherished and respected by all its employees, shareholders and the consumers.

Similarly *yantra* is logo or emblem of a god or the goddess. It symbolises the power of the deity. The worship of the *yantra* is as important as worship of the related deity.

A car carrying words 'Mercedese Benz' does not convince you until it displays its Merc *Yantra,* the symbol.

The same psychology works on religious level too. That makes *yantra* an important figuration.

WHY *SHRIYANTRA* IS THE GREATEST?

'SHRIYANTRA', the *swastika* figure represents the goddess of prosperity, Laxmi.

Among *yantras* it enjoys the highest reverence.

The *Puranic* legend is that once Laxmi retreated to *Vaikuntha* domain in heavens from the earth angered over some matter. In her absence the earth suffered all kinds of shortages, famines, droughts and impoverishments. Vishnu and Sage Vashishta tried to persuade her to return to earth but failed. She would not listen.

Then, Guru Brihaspati devised the *'Shriyantra'* figuration and advised its worship to attract Laxmi. Goddess Laxmi returned to the earth and revealed, "*Shriyantra* is my foundation. In it lives my soul. So, I had to return."

Shriyantra is a very popular and sacred symbol with the trading class because they are always praying for riches. The other common folk also rever it as the sign of prosperity. The prosperity is the cause of happiness, contentment, pleasures, luxuries, respect, glory and fame. Hence, *Shriyantra* symbolises the powers of other gods and goddesses as well. Hence, it is considered to be the master *yantra* of them all, the 'logo' of well being.

WHY KEEP SILENCE *(MAUN-VRATA)?*

Dharma Shastra advises that during answering the nature's call, brushing teeth, cleaning nose or eyes, wiping sweat, bleeding from wound, bathing, making love, eating, food and performing *shraddha* one should keep his mouth shut.

The most of them are daily customs.

The truth of the above advice has created as universal maxim 'Silence is gold'. In the course of the most of the above acts a person keeps quiet naturally as in some of the acts the organs of speech are involved.

Even otherwise keeping silence for a period as daily exercise does a lot of good. It frees the mind to contemplate on the serious matters of life and the spiritual aspects. A habit of introspection gets inculcated which can prove gainful in the practical life.

It should be remembered that garrulous and talkative persons are not taken seriously. So, the people of wisdom and serious nature open their mouths only when required. That earns them a great respect.

Silence in a virtue especially in the grave matters of religion and spiritualism. After all meditation is merely a physical manifestation of silence.

Even those whose profession is to speak require generous spells of quiet or *maun-vrata* to make their speech more powerful and effective. Remember that an active tongue has created many a war, spoiled many a relationship, generated many a misunderstanding, bred many a ill feeling, broken many a heart and hurt much and many more than swords and guns have.

So, the tongue needs to be used sparingly. *Shastras* have advised to select periods or days for *maun-vrata.* The days prescribed are *Ashtami* (8th day), *Ekadashi* (11th day), full moon day and *Amavasya* (No moon) in a month. The people on their own can also fix hours or days for their silence.

Silence in a way breaks one's contact with the material world. Thus, it contributes to one's spiritual growth and evolution. The sages get over a tricky passage of time through observing the silence making sure that the tongue does not aggravate the situation.

It works in the business and the politics also. There the silence is expressed in two words—'No Comment'. It kills all the controversies.

The *Shastras* advise observance of *'maun'* if the confrontations are becoming too vocal. The *maun* allows time to heal the wounds. It subdues the rising passions. It eliminates the differences. It adds balm to the hurt feelings. It gives a purchase room for reconciliation.

So, *Shastras* rule to make it a daily ritual or periodic to strengthen the peace process which can make the life and the world a *happier* and peaceful exercise.

Shastras say that silence is of two kinds—vocal silence and mental silence. The first one is not speaking anything. The second one is a hard exercise of putting the thinking process of the mind in neutral gear. It is emptying the mind of all thoughts which might be difficult for ordinary persons. Yogis can do it. Normally one can't stop thinking of something. At best one can concentrate his mind on a single thought. You can give it a try.

WHY BELLS ARE RUNG IN TEMPLES?

The ringing of bells in temples or churches has echo logic of science behind it. The bell sound has been used for drawing attention from time immemorial. It is a part of human evolution.

The cave man used to climb a high point and make a full throated sound to attract the attention of other humans. The sound would echo in the valleys. Such full throated screams were used to exchange messages or to warn others. The lions and other predators also roar to announce their presence.

Thus echoing sound became a means of the calling attention of others and it got imprinted on the evolving human brain.

When the metals came into the use in human lives the need of calling the attention of others was still there. The characteristic of metals of producing sharp ringing voice got noticed. The sounds they produced were far reaching. As brass and bronze were invented their great sound creating qualities gave the man idea to use then into making sounds gadgets. It led to the birth of gongs, cymbals and then bells.

In the ancient times human life revolved around religion as it was the only intellectual exercise then. Calling the attention of the people to the prayers was the first priority. For this purpose the bell was the perfect gadget because one swing to the hanging bell produced a series of echoing sounds of a distinctive quality. Thus, bells became part of the temples. A devotee could announce his arrival to the deity by ringing the bell.

And thus, bell became an accessory of the religion. Later Christians also adopted bells for the churches to announce the celebrations. Small bells were made for private prayers at homes.

This bell habit spread into the normal life of the humans. The door bells came into the practice to announce the arrival of a visitor. The telephones rang like bells to signal the coming of a call. The alarm bells warned people.

But the larger sizes and typical designs of the bells of the temples continue to create a distinct sound which feels loaded with religion and devotion. It has carved out a very special spiritual wavelength for itself which goes straight to the soul and awakens religious sentiments which no other sound can.

In certain aspects human life is attuned to sounds.

The siren of a mill rules the hearts and the body of the mill workers, Similarly the sound of a temple bell rules the souls of the faithfuls and arouses their devotion.

The church bell has the same effect. The wedding bells stir up romantic feelings.

WHY CELIBACY?

Hindu *Shastras* lay a great stress on celibacy. It is remaining unmarried with mind free of any sexual considerations or physical relationship with the opposite sex. The married people too can practice celibacy for resolved duration by banishing all sexual acts and thoughts. Some people mistakenly believe that celibacy is staying away from women which means it is a male preserve. It is not so.

The word used for the celibacy in the scriptures is *'Brahmcharya'* which literally means 'conduct like God'. Obviously God here is conceived as something asexual, having no gender. So, we can assume that *Brahmcharya* applies to both sexes and it is a conduct which is free of any gender activity. But everywhere reference is always made to male gender.

The reason could be that in our society women have been forced to be extremely passive who are not receptive to take any initiative in the dealings of life. That has been the practical reality. All the decision of the life of a woman are taken my males in the forms of the father, or brother or husband. So, the onus is on the male.

So, technically absence of sexual interaction between the members of opposite sexes is celibacy or *Brahmcharya. Shahstras* advise celibacy because sex is too distracting and fills one's mind with thoughts of

carnal pleasures leaving little room for noble thoughts, religious pursuits and spiritual exercises.

And also it takes away a lot of time.

Practising celibacy has one more gain. One has to put in a lot of effort in exercising control over mind and senses. Over a period of time a celibate person gains amazing control over his mind and he can focus it on any subject. As a result he develops an excellent memory. Due to celibacy Swami Vivekananda had a memory sharp enough to memorise a 500 page book in one hour only.

Shastras categorise celibacy of different kinds. Not talking to a woman with sexual intent or interest is 'Vocal celibacy'. And not thinking of women in sexual context is 'Mental celibacy'. As far as an unmarried celibate is concerned he must not let his status be marred or defiled by sexual intent by voice, thought or sight.

There is also a provision for married persons to qualify as celibate person. A married person if uses sex only for procreation and not for physical pleasure or as means of enjoyment he is married celibate.

During the religious rite or ceremonial custom the person involved in that rite should avoid sex during that period.

There is food and life style regimen also for a celibate person. He or she should not take spicy food, fried items, fast foods or non-vegetarian foods. They are hot foods and the celibacy is a cool affair. A lot of curd and water intake is advised. The hot foods encourage pleasure seeking tendencies.

A celibate must wear coarse clothes. The silky and lustrous dresses excite the body. For the same reason a

celibate must sleep on hard floor or wooden plank with soft mattress. No smoke, drink and drugs are permitted.

WHY AVOID ALIEN FOOD?

Shastras disapprove of the food alien in the nature. General interpretation is that the food cooked in the kitchens of the other's homes is alien food. But orthodox clergy believes that any food cooked by persons other than one's own mother, wife or self should be considered alien food.

But this extreme view is just not practical in present day conditions. Even *Shastra* allows the food as good that is offered by a guru to his pupil or the food provided by a respectable elder who is like father. By implication it can logically mean the wife of the *guru* and the elderly women who are like one's mother.

This restriction does not include food taken in restaurants and hotels because one pays for it and that makes it one's own.

This religious order is framed in the belief that food shapes one's behaviour and outlook. Non-vegetarian food makes one haughty, arrogant and insensitive to the pain of others.

Vegetable foods make one soft natured, religious and compassionate. Acidic foods generate mood of irritation. A man suffering of indigestion caused by oily foods is in unpleasant state of mind and is difficult to please. He stays in uncomfortable frame of mind. All these factors affect a person's life in a big way.

Shastras extend this affect to spiritual aspects also. The food offered by other person could be fruits of the money earned by the dishonest means. It could also be a reward of some crime. The food of the corruption and

the crime can never nurture spiritualism. A corrupt person's son also takes route of the corruption. The food earned by the corruption money infects the consumer's soul, conscience and mind. So, such food is not religious because the religion is another name of love, compassion, mercy, honesty and the truth.

The cooked foods bear the imprint of their means employed in the procurement of the basic ingredients. That imprint is vague on grains or fruits. Cut up fruit has deeper imprint than whole fruit. Then, there is question of the intent. The other person offering you food can have some unspelt expectations in return. So, why carry the guilt of being indebted to a person feeding you? The alien food has several grey areas.

In and around a religious ceremony or the ordered site the alien food should strictly be avoided to be on the safe side. The religion is a sacred matter. One must honour its sanctity by religiously following the ground rules.

WHY NOT READ IN LYING POSITION?

Shastras forbid reading books in lying condition. Obviously it ruled so because reading in that condition meant that the reader was not respectful to the book and was taking it without seriousness. In the ancient times only reading material available were religious books that we today call 'mythological literature'. They were all religious treatises and stories of gods.

Naturally one's respect was expected to be shown to those holy books. Those books demanded more respect because they were hand written and thus were fruits of some one's dedicated labour. The books were worshipable.

Even modern science does not advise reading books in lying position due to medical reasons. Many students grow the habit of reading in bed because they have to do a lot of study. Reading in the sitting position for hours becomes tiresome. There are people who enjoy light reading in bed especially the thrillers that one likes to finish without putting it down.

But doctors say that such reading is not good for eyes as the lying position puts more stress on the eyes.

Human species as *homo erectus* evolved a straight back to be able to stand erect on his feet. He was becoming an intelligent creature. There is a theory that straighter the back more intelligent the creature will be. The spinal cord is the home of 'Medulla Oblongata' the secondary brain. It is in the most effective state when the spine is straight. The bent spine is bad for any intellectual exercise. The lying position on the side tends to bend the spine.

The elders should consciously avoid reading in lying position because children tend to copy them naturally.

WHY IS FLESH EATING BAD?

Today drinking and flesh eating is becoming a fashion and flesh cuisines are multiplying. Most of the countries of the world can't even imagine food without flesh items. West is meat, chicken, pork and beef eater. Most of the East is fish partial.

Between these zones India is the only land that preached vegetarianism.

Hindu scriptures ruled that flesh eating and drinking were sins.

Scientifically speaking a large number of anthropologists hold the view that humans are

naturally evolved for vegetable eating. The carnivorous creatures have special set of teeth for cutting, tearing and grinding flesh which is a tough food. They include molars and pointed teeth like canines have. But the humans have different kind of teeth which are only fit for consuming vegetarian kind of food where cutting and tearing is not required.

Then the digestive system of humans is capable of processing only light vegetarian food. It can not digest raw flesh.

So, what made cave man a meat eater? The answer is simple, the discovery by man of fire. The flesh put in fire turned into a cooked food, that suddenly became tasty to eat, easily chewable and digestible. Thus, the man became unnatural meat eater.

The fire solved all the technical problems the flesh posed before man. In a way, we can say that the fire animalised the man. This change over proved disastrous. As man was equipped with the deadliest weapon, brain. It turned into a butcher on two legs that walked erect and he began the indiscriminate butchery of creatures with tasty meat. Although it walked erect its mind was becoming crooked because of eating the unnatural food.

But Hindu land of Bharata refused to get animalised. It steadfastly continued to preach the vegetarianism. While the rest of the world used fire to roast flesh Bharata used fire for *yajna* and other spiritual exercises.

The flesh eating changed the basic nature of man. From a peaceful and compassionate creature man became merciless and insensitive killer. While the rest of the mankind produced butchers like Hennibals, Atila the Huns, Genghis Khans, Alexanders and Hitlers

Bharata in the same period produced Buddha, Ashoka, Guru Nanak and Mahatma Gandhi.

Flesh eating poses another danger. The flesh providing animals pass on germs and viruses to the consumers. A flesh eater is always exposed to diseases. Man's immune systems get affected and one becomes prone to maladies. Meats produce blood cholesterol which makes the flesh eater easy prey to heart diseases and mental tensions. Meat foods induce the production of extra acids to digest food which ravage lever, intestines and gal bladder creating new health problems. Meat products contain a high degree of bio fats increasing the health hazards for man by several multiple factors.

Lately genetic disorders and mutations are causing horrendous epidemics in flesh providing species of animals. We have seen the spectre of 'Madcow disease' and 'Bird flue' in poultry birds. All the nutrition advantages of flesh eating get outweighed by the health hazards and psychological damages it entails.

Killing animals cause unhygienic conditions. A man who visits slaughter house gets so horrified that most likelihood is that he won't ever even touch meat in the future.

It is heartening that vegetarianism is fast becoming a fashion in the West. The modern man has finally realised that there is a lot of sense in giving up flesh eating for one's own physical and the mental health. *Shastra* was not wrong after all.

WHY ONION AND GARLIC ARE NO GOOD?

Shastra forbids the use of onions and garlic. It suggests a fast as penance after eating them.

It disapproves of all bulbous products that grow under the ground as root vegetables. Among them onion and garlic are single out for refrain. The *Shastra* has even set refrain degrees for various edibles in categories.. 20-25% fruits are refrainable, 30-35% among grains, 40-45% for vegetables, Onion and garlic are 90% avoidable and flesh is 100% no-no.

In India different sects employ different yardsticks. In Jainism onion and garlic are completely forbidden. Other sects allow up to 80% of the forbidden items.

Onion and garlic are acidic and gaseous. Eating them produces an uneasy feeling. Eating them raw loads the breath with unpleasant smell that can offend the other people. Even love making can be a bad experience if one of the partners had eaten onion or garlic. One should not eat onion or garlic if one is scheduled to hold discussion with other people or if one is to interact closely with other people.

Most of the reputed firms have standing instructions for their salesmen not to eat onion or garlic in the breakfast or lunch on a working day because their work involves dealing with people maintaining the positive impression. No wonder that during religious ceremonies and solemn rites eating or serving onions or garlic is strictly forbidden by *Shastras*.

Medicine science says that eating onions during rainy season creates stomach disorders. The onion chewing thins the semen. But it admits that onion and garlic do have medicinal values. Garlic is good for heart. In fever onion paste is applied to the belly and the forehead of the patient. It brings down fever. Onion juice is given as medicine.

But their use as food items is disfavoured.

Even the entry of onions and garlic in the kitchen of a religious person is strictly prohibited.

WHY TOUCH BELLY AFTER EATING?

Shastra orders that after eating food the belly should be caressed with following recitation :

Agastyam Kumbhakaranam Cha Shanim Cha Vadavanatama,

Ahar Paripakama Smared Bheeman Cha Panchakam.

The *mantra* invokes the powers of Agastya Rishi, Kumbhakarna, Shani, Fire and Bheema for quick digestion of the partaken food.

Caressing belly after eating is a natural reaction to express satisfaction of having eaten a hearty meal. It is a way of thanking God for having provided the food.

In Christian custom 'Thanks' are said before the dinner. The belly caress is after dinner thanks. It is also the manifestation of the consciousness that the food eaten has to be digested and the digestive powers of the body are invoked to get into action. We don't know if this invocation really inspires the digestive juices to flow in. The wish is there, no doubt.

WHY 100 PACES TO DIGESTION?

Shastra advise slow walk of 100 paces *Shatpawli* after eating food. Ayurveda orders *'Bhuktopavishta Stholayam Shyanasya Rujastha, Ayushahakramanasya Mrityurdhavitadhavitay.'*

Meaning : After eating sitting at a place causes obesity. One who takes a slow walk lives longer. But who runs or races he approaches death fast.

Walking after eating is a custom in most of the cultures. In the West people pace the floor or take a slow walk in the lawn or the garden. Running or walking fast unhealthily shakes the filled up stomach which results in stomachache. Slow walk gently rocks the stomach helping the digestive process.

WHY SLEEP ON THE LEFT SIDE?

After post meals *shatpawli* lying on bed on the left side is also ordered by *Shastras* which is mentioned as *'Vamkukshi'*. About it the book says *'Vampasharven Somvishet'* which literally means—'After taking meals and *Shatpawli* lie down on your left side'. The duration suggested for it is around one and a half hours.

The logic is lying on the left side helps in putting pressure on the food eaten which is helpful to the food pushing wave movements of the small intestine. The right side does not create the desired pressure. Another *Shastra* theory is that through left side nostril runs sun nerve *'Pingla'* which gets activated by lying on the left side. Its activeness helps in the digestion. The right side nostril contains moon nerve *'Ida'* which plays no part in digestive process.

The theory is not yet testified.

WHY PROPRIETY?

What is proper or improper in the given situation? This consideration is called *'Shuchirbhaotata'* by the *Shastras*.

While going on a journey the proper thing is to take along dry food and water. While on the long and difficult pilgrimage to Amarnath or Mansarovar one should eat whatever comes by. There is no scope for any hair splitting.

On the occasions of marriage, religious ceremonies and festive occasion don't make your own piety an issue. In such gatherings a lot of transgressions naturally occur without malcontention.

So, one must be generous and accommodating.

Abhismriti Shastra rules that in the events of fire, flood, earthquake, invasion, robbery, any other natural calamity, *yajna*, travel and festivals one should not act touch-shy. One other book says that any bad caused during sleeping, sitting, riding, boating, carrying burden or getting touched by undesirables may not be minded.

The touch of air blows away the bad effect.

Whatever act is gone through in the process of surgery is proper. Those who make an issue of touchability in such grave situations are the real untouchables. Such people are never happy or satisfied. There is no cure of the sickness of the untouchability infected mind.

The customs must not be followed with blind faith. Medical science and psychology should not be lost sight of. After answering the natural call the natural reaction is to clean up. Do it in that spirit.

At coming home after a long day one feels like taking a shower to freshen up. There is natural propriety. One must not credit himself with having done some religious duty. One did it as it felt proper. Muslims perform *Vaju* (washing face, feet and arms) five times day. It is clean and healthful exercise.

According to *Shastra* after eating and answering nature's call washing mouth 8 times and 4 times after urinating are proper acts.

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Chapter-II

DAILY-PLEDGED MEDITATION AND WORSHIP

In practical life a person has to enact several deeds. The deeds basically are of two kinds—worldly deeds and spiritual deeds.

The worldly kind consists of farming, business or services. The spiritual acts are *Anhik* rituals, worship, fasting, upholding family traditions and religions rites. The two kinds of deeds are not directly related. The ones engaged in spiritual *karma* are of religious nature.

The spiritual *karma* is not different acts of worship, prayer or meditation. The three are performed together in the normal way. Although conceptually they are different yet they are used for the same purpose and meaning.

Just as cement, sand and water mixed in right proportion when used methodically shapes a structure, in the same way meditation, prayer and worship in correct proportion work wonders. Pursuing any single subject creates imbalance, ego and disenchantment The worldly deeds are made meaningful by the spiritual deeds. And spiritual deeds progress through meditation, worship and prayer.

Meditation is sublime process of getting the body perform deeds. In this respect Patanjali Rishi's *'Ashtang Yoga'* is a recognised guide. In it God is merely symbolic. The faithful can keep any idol or item infront of him as a God symbol. To teach various aspects of yoga there are several organisations doing good work in India. Sometimes the meditations don't fructify being limited to very special and specific subjects. The guidance of an accomplished *guru* will be very helpful in choosing the right type of meditation. Some people make a choice of the difficult type just to go through an experience.

It takes a lot of patience and testing mind.

For meditation and worship besides the proper process true devotion is required. Not beaming the mind into the worshiped god and just moving hands in the worship patterns makes it a mechanical exercise. Similarly to make prayer a meaningful exercise meditation and worship should also be there. Besides prayers if family rites, customs and fasts are

undertaken there is a chance of the breeding of ego. The priest who talks about the powers of a deity but does not reveal the right worship process they breed the ego and devotee gets misled. He goes after the priest instead of going into the fold of the deity. So, before worshiping or praying to a deity the due process should be learnt.

The worship method is different from the meditation or prayer. The worship consists of proper *pooja,* mind application, fast, the character recitation etc. The chosen deity often stays out of the limits of the mind. So, a seeker must first worship a saint or *mahatma* before turning to the main deity, the objective.

The main aim of the worship is to destroy the materialistic mindset. It is done in two ways, the first is to renounce the world and the relationships to go through the ascetic route. It is difficult.

The second route is to gradually reduce the attachments of the worldly kind. If the objective deity is of the fierce kind then there is danger of family getting destroyed before the family mindset. That is why it is better to worship a saint or *mahatma* for the gradual spiritual progression.

Even while the worship vested God is one yet for birth, state and harmony the manifestation occurs in Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva forms. But in the world system He manifests in pentagod form of Surya, Ganesha, Devi, Shiva and Vishnu.

Pentagod worship is good for spiritual progression.

Some people according to days and dates start worships of 8-10 gods simultaneously. But true faith

shows him one god in all different images. A little further he begins to see diversity in the unity of God. Such progressions result in true devotion.

In daily *Anhik* worship accessories must be placed on dry grass. Flowers arranged, incense sticks burnt and sweets/fruits be put before the deity idol. *Rangoli* should also be drawn and the worship properly performed. After *pooja* all must sit together and take *prasadam.*

During worship appropriate *mantras* must be recited or prayer said. It creates a pious atmosphere which spreads on to the neighbourhood.

WHAT *SHASTRAS* RULE ON *YAJNA* AND *POOJA*?

Shastras order following items as essential ingredients for *yajnas* and the worship of the deities: Clothes, better half, sacred tree, seven soils *(Saptamritika),* seven grains *(Saptadhanya),* five precious things *(Panchratna), Madhupark* (a honey concoction), *Sarvoshdhi* (Herbal mix), *Panchamrit* (Five nectars), *Panchpallava* (Five leaves) *Navgraha Samidha* (Nine planet mix). The details are as under.

❑ *Vastra—Shastra* orders some special clothing to be worn at *yajna* and worship. Undergarments are must. Single piece wrap-up clothing is not favoured. Silk, woollen or cotton are preferable. The clothing should not be unclean, borrowed or picked up.

❑ *Better half*—In most Hindu rites husband must be accompanied by wife. The order is for wife to sit on the left side of her husband at the occasions of *Yajna Homa, Vrata, Dana, Snama,* worship, pilgrimage or marriage. The right side is ordered during receiving

blessings, coronation, getting honoured, convocation paying obeisance, touching elder's feet and on bed.

❑ ***Ghritam (Ghee)***—Ghee is an essential ingredient of religious rites. In case of the unavailability of ghee cow milk or curd can be used as the substitute. Buffalo or goat milk/curd are also allowed.

❑ ***Sacred trees***—According to *Shastras* following trees are sacred and *yagya* worthy—*Shami, Palash, Bargad, Aghada, Ashwath, Odumber, Bilva, Chandan, Saral, Saal, Devdar* and *Khadir.* Their paste or parts are sacred.

❑ ***Saptamritika***—It is the soil from seven places. The places from where little amounts as symbolic soils must be gathered are Horse stable, Elephant shed, Snakepit, the place where rivers meet, pond or lake, Royal palace gate and cow shed. Mix of all these soils is *Saptamritika.*

❑ ***Saptdhanya***—A collection of seven kinds of food grains is *Saptadhanya.* It includes rice, wheat, sesame, beans, gram, *raal* and *sanwan.*

❑ ***Panchratna***—For several of the rites *panchratna* is required. It consists of gold, diamond, pearl, sapphire and quartz.

❑ ***Madhuparka***—The mixture of one small spoon of ghee, two small spoons of curd and one small spoon of honey is *madhuparka.*

❑ ***Sarvoshdhi***—The mix of the powders of the herbal plants of *Koot, Jatamansi, Halkund, Avan Haldi, Vekhhanda, Chafa, Chandana, Dagarphool, Nagarmotha* and *Kachur* makes an aromatic concoction that arouses pious feelings.

❑ ***Panchamrita***—It is ordered for all kinds of worships. The deities are believed to love this mixture of milk, curd, honey and jaggery sugar.

❑ ***Panchpallava***—The leaves of five trees namely Mango, Blackberry, *Kaith, Bijaura* and *Bel* are considered five holy leaves. Sometimes and at some places Banyan, *Peepal, Oudumbar,* Orange, *Shami* and *Ashmantak* leaves are also used as *panchapallava* for the worships.

❑ ***Navgraha Samidha***—*Shastra* rule that several trees represent different planets of the solar system. The woods of these nine trees are ground or pounded into pulp and it becomes symbolic nine planet paste that is *Navgraha Samidha.* The trees are *Arka, Palash, Khair, Apamarg, Peepal, Oudumbar, Shami, Dhurva* and *Darbha.* The wood pieces should be clean and green. Not dry or moth-eaten.

WHY IDOL WORSHIP?

Why should one put faith in the moulded or engraved or chiselled pieces of metal, wood or stone as gods? They are merely lifeless objects.

There is sound logic behind it. God is Power Supreme that is omnipresent throughout the universe. Although God is an abstract force and unmanifest yet it is present in everything, every creature, everywhere and everytime. By that token he is present in idols also. For that very reason an idol is not Godless. He is there by the basic principle of his omnipresence.

For common folk it is not easy to beam their thoughts and devotion on something abstract. An idol as representative of God presents a point where faithfuls can focus their devotion on keeping the

distractions out of their minds. The idol becomes a spiritual focal point through which a faithful can lock in to the abstract God.

A devotee's devotion, faith, worship, reverence and belief makes the deity idol Godful. A human being after all is a small existence with every limited spiritual and physical capacities. Power Supreme is an infinite mind boggling amount which will never ever come within the scope of any human's imagination. God in deity form is a small amount which a person can satisfactorily deal with and give manifestation to his faith in his humanly small way.

The deity idol should be treated, revered and worshiped as ordered by *Shastras* to create a religious custom for making the exercise systematic. A system becomes tradition sanctified by time.

WHY DO IDOL WORSHIP, SYMBOLIC WORSHIP, ABSTRACT WORSHIP AND SPIRITUAL WORSHIP?

The beginner has to start with idol worship. One can easily focus his devotion into the visible deity which infact is merely a representative of the abstract Power Supreme God. Over a period of time the faithful's mind becomes a little more educated spiritually. He can visualise the presence of the deity without even looking at it. Even when he is not sitting before the idol he can see it through his mind's eye. A little more training takes him to level where he sees God behind that worshiped deity.

Some more progress enables one to connect with God spiritually. The deity image now gets transformed into merely a window in the mind through which he can see God, feel His force or energy flowing in.

Similarly in the beginning one says the prayers or *mantras* loudly. After some time it gets reduced to merely a murmur. Then only lips move without making any sound. A little move progression leads to a stage where one repeats *mantras* or chants only mentally. A stage comes where words are not needed. The mind simply locks in to the deity. Then it serves as an adopter further down with lead to God and the light of enlightenment gets switched on. The final union with Creator becomes just a matter of time.

Upto which level one reaches depends on one's quality of devotion and the spiritual capacity.

Shastras define these various levels as *Murti pooja, Parthiv pooja, Manas Pooja* and *Satviki Murti Pooja.*

Parthiv pooja is the worship of symbolics. Here the deity is in symbolic form as *Lingam* is symbolic of Lord Shiva. *'Shriyantra'* is symbol of goddess Laxmi. In this kind of worship the mind's relating power is prominent.

WHY *ABHISHEKAM* (ANOINTMENT)?

Abhishekam is anointment of the idols with liquids. Water, milk, juice and oil. With the recitation of *mantras* the idols are applied with the above liquids. *Shastras* explain that this process charges the idols with divine energies to prove more blissful. There is scientific angle to this. Such processes involve physical activity. *Abhishekam* channellises all the body activities and the mind in the act of the worship of the deity. Thus a person becomes completely invests himself into the worship.

It is like a man washing his car demonstrates his

involvement with it. A teenager does it by cleaning his bike.

ANOINTING PROCESS

Shastra has set a custom for ointing the deities. Use of ointing vessel is ordered. For ointing Shiva idol cow horn, for Vishnu idol conch shell left grooved or right grooved and for Ganesh copper vessel is prescribed. The vessel should be held in left hand and right hand used for pouring water in them.

For milk and oil brass, bronze or silver vessel is ordered. Conch shell, horn or copper vessel should be avoided in these two cases. For juice tin plated vessel is ordered to be used.

Surya and *Devi* should be treated to water. Vishnu and Ganesh is best ointed with milk. Shani is ordered to be anointed with oil (Mustard) and Shiva with sugar cane juice. The water ointment is acceptable to all deities normally, provided the vessel used is as prescribed for water.

Abhishekam can be done with *Panchamrita* as well. Offer mango, banana, fruit juice or nuts to deity after the anointment.

After ointing with non-water liquids the water must be used in the end anyway to wash the idol clean. Use cow horn or conch shell for pouring water. Spoon is also allowed in the clean up anointing. The water meant for ointing deities must be kept in the conch shell overnight. Such a conch shell must be duly worshiped. As an alternative, wash the shell clean and dry it up. Then fill it with water. Add some water from *pooja* bowl (kept traditionally before the idol as normal custom) to the shell water. Sprinkle this water over

yourself and *pooja* material for purification. This shell water should be used for wetting the deity before ointing with other liquids. Pour this water over deity at the end for the clean up process.

Do not dip conch shell or horn in water. Pour water into them from another vessel. In temples conch shell *pooja* is prohibited in Shiva worship. If the idol looks messed up heated conch shell water must be poured over the deity for clean up. Wipe the idol dry and apply scent on the face of the deity.

These rituals bring one closer to one's deity emotionally and reinforces the devotion.

WHY FLOWERS ARE OFFERED TO GOD?

God is the very epitome of beauty and the purest purity. When a man sees around looking for the best symbols of beauty, purity and freshness his eyes naturally fixed on the flowers.

Nothing could match a flower in those sublime qualities. He thought that God could be nothing but the qualities of a flower raised to the power infinity. The flowers were also related to the process of ongoing creativity by being the symbols of the formation of the seeds. God was also the cause of the creation. What could be more better way of paying obeisance to God than offering him the flowers, the humble earthly symbols of His qualities?

The love was the most intimate and the greatest natural experience humans could go through. The people thought that love itself was God. Flowers aroused the feeling of love and romance. Offering a flower to the beloved as expression of love was very

natural act. From whichever angle we look a flower leads to the thoughts of God.

Thus, flower became an ingredient in the very conception of the divine powers. Hindus conceptualised Lord Vishnu reclining on the *Sheshnaga* bed, a flower stalk sprouting out of his navel at the tip of which was a lotus flower abloom on which sat Lord Brahma, the creative power of Lord God. Then various gods and the goddesses came be associated with different flowers in the different ways and the contexts.

The linking of the flowers to the divinity was a part of the spiritual evolution of man very naturally. *Shastras* also set rules for offering flowers to deities to make flower link a religious tradition.

Shastras rule that flowers should be offered to deities with stalks on and the stalk part must point towards the flower offering devotee. The flowers should not be crushed or in withering condition. There also are rules forbidding certain flowers for specific gods or goddesses to lend sanctity to the flower offering custom by providing the ground for the creation of legends through religious authority.

Shiva—The flowers of *Kewra, Bakuli* and *Kund* are disapproved. In some regions *Tulsi* is also prohibited. But Shiva symbol *Shaligram* stone is exception. *Tulsi* leaves can be offered on *Shaligram.*

Ganesha—Do not offer *Tulsi* flowers to *Ganesha.* But on *Ganesh Chaturthi* day the white *Tulsi* flowers can be offered.

***Pitra* (Ancestors)**—Use of red flower in *Shraddha*

(custom of religious offerings for dead ancestors) is not allowed.

Goddess Durga—*Dhurva* should not be dedicated to Durga. But for *Chandi Havana* it is essential.

Vishnu—For *Vishnu* worship leaves and climber parts are not permitted. Flowers should be offered to deities only till they are in the fresh state. *Shastra* has determined periods for species of flowers they remain fresh after the plucking. There also order about not plucking leaves or flowers of different trees or plants on the days listed by it.

WHY LOTUS IS IMPORTANT?

Many gods and goddesses are conceived to be sitting on the lotus flowers in Hindu deity pantheon. The closeness of our religion to the lotus is apparent. Why lotus is so important to us?

To honour the beauty of god's eyes or the pretty feet lotus is chosen as simile. A woman's beauty and tenderness is compared with lotus.

Lotus has red colour. Red is holy and auspicious in Hindu thought. Red vermillion, red *geru,* red *bindi,* red saree at wedding, red *tilak* and several other signs related with colour red is considered auspicious.

Lotus is a natural flower. It is not grafted or cultivated or cultured like rose.

Lotus also is symbol of religious piety. Hindu religion is based on the philosophies evolved by sages and *rishis*. One of the most sacred custom of the sages and the penance makers was to get up in *Brahm*

muhurtam (4.30 a.m.-5.30 a.m.) in the early morning and go to the lake or the pond to take bath to purify one self for other religious duties. The lotus grew abundantly in lakes and ponds in ancient times. While sages bathed they always found lotuses growing around glowing with freshness having dew drops trickling down. They were living symbols of freshness and ever clean piety. That image got imprinted in the minds of the sages and the lotus became most revered flower in the Hindu religion.

WHY SOUND CONCH SHELL?

In Hindu custom conch shell is blown at occasions of worship, *yajna,* birth, funerals or other rites or ceremonies. It also was bugle of war during ancient times and middle ages. There are different kinds of shells available in the market.

During Mahabharata times all the warriors had their own favourite shells with fancy names. Arjuna had 'Panchjanya' conch shell to announce his intention to battle. Other famous ones were 'Anant Vijaya', 'Pondra' 'Sughosh', 'Mani Pushpak' etc.

It sounds like a fog horn. A special effort is required to blow conch shell. The blower is required to concentrate his mind and blow a lungful of air with measured force into the shell through his lips pressed to it at a specific angle to make the booming sound. It takes some practice. The distinct sound signifies birth or death or start of a battle, or *pooja* or some other religious rite about to begin. The sound is far reaching.

The booming sound sounds like long drawn 'Om',

the most revered chant of Hinduism symbolic of the humming echo of big bang (Brahm) which the scientists also agree that still hangs in the space as the cosmic vibration.

The effort of blowing the conch shell puts entire body systems in action mode to tackle the task about to be begun. Some people also believe that the frequency of its sound waves is right at a level which charges up the brain centres related to spiritual and emotional awakening.

After blowing the conch shell it should be wiped clean. It should be kept on a stool by the side of the home temple. Put some flowers and *Tulsi* leaves on it as your mark of reverence.

Remember, that it is the shell of a dead sea creature. In this fact lies the basic philosophy of the Hindu thought that there is death in life and the death is the beginning of another life which also ends in death. And this cycle is our fate.

WHY MOVE ANTI-CLOCKWISE?

For going around a deity idol or a temple or other worshiped objects *Shastras* prescribe anti-clockwise move. Why?

There is symbolic psychological point. In anti-clockwise move right side of the devotee remains on the outer side. The weaker left side is exposed to the deity or the temple. By this act devotee accepts the superiority of the deity and symbolically surrenders to the powers of the deity.

It is a natural habit. A creature exposes most vulnerable part of its body to the one it is accepting

defeat to and is surrendering to. A dog exposes its tender belly to the victor to announce its surrender. A devotee adopts the same rule in anti-clockwise move.

WHY GREET WITH FOLDED HANDS?

The different cultures have different modes of greeting. Hindu *Shastras* has prescribed three or four prominent modes of greeting or seeking blessings.

Feet touching—The younger ones are advised to greet the elders or guru or scholars by touching their feet to show the respect.

Blessing—The elders or superior persons touch the head of the bent down blessing seeker to pass on his good wishes. They may even caress the back to make the blessing more sincere.

Embrace—The people of equal status and counter parts in family relationship embrace and hug each other when the two meet.

Namaste—But the most popular mode of greeting is *'Namaste'* said as head gets slightly bent to show humility. This greeting is valid for every situation and between any two parties.

Some people of extra humility or to express extra respect for the other person bend the head down enough to touch the tips of the fingers of the folded hands with the forehead.

Why did *Shastras* devise this mode of greeting?

The answer is revealed by body language science. In ancient era when the languages were not fully developed two persons used to raise both palms as a sign of peace. Open palms revealed that the person was

holding no weapon and was seeking peace and friendship.

Still the hands could do some damage on their own even without weapon. So, Indian sages improved the mode a bit more by introducing the custom of bringing the palms together in folded hands state. This act practically shut out any possibility of offensive use of hands. And at the same time it became a posture of greeting. It was not only a wish for peace but friendship also. Bringing palms closer also conveyed the desire of close relationship, as close as the palms. The scientists have observed that those whose greeting is not sincere happen to leave some gap between the palms. The ones who greet with true sincerity press the palms together leaving no gap. *'Namaste'* literally means I bow (to you). So, it is a very natural mode.

There is physical aspect to it as well. The folded hands give better balance to the body because it is physically a defensive position.

Shashtangam—The *Shastras* prescribe *Shashtang pranama* in case of paying obeisance to the saints, holymen and the deities in temples or outside. In this mode a devotee lies face down on floor or ground with chest, knees and feet touching the ground or floor. The hands are spread forward with palms touching the floor. Then, the devotee reverently touches the floor with his fore head.

This is total surrender posture according to body language science. That is what the devotee is wishing—total surrender to the deity. In some temples the devotees are ordered to take off shirt and vest

leaving only the loin or *langot* on the body. This is done to convey the message that before the lord all are equal. In that spirit the devotees are to come to face the deity. The upper garments generally reveal the social or economic status of a person.

WHY *PANCHAMRITA*?

After worship of the deity partaking of *Panchamrita* (Mix of milk, curd, honey, ghee and jaggery sugar) is considered the consummation act of the whole process. The praying to deity in the temple also ends in receiving *Panchamrita* from the priest.

The religious way to accept it is the hollow of palm in 'cow-ear' position of hand. Index finger in folded state is kept lightly pressed down by the thumb and rest of the three finger remain spread out pressed together giving the hand a shape akin to a cow-ear.

Just a drop should be consumed as the larger amount tends to induce production of saliva which is considered no good in a religious act.

The number of times to take *Panchamrita* is also ordered. After at home *pooja* take it twice. If you are on fast for the day three is prescribed. But in public temple only once is the order.

Panchamrita is ordered to be fed to a dying person or a sick one. Some people sweep the palm over head after taking liquid as holy *amritam.* Don't do it in the case of *Panchamrita* because it contains honey which can mess up your hair.

Some *mantras* are also prescribed to be recited

while accepting *Panchamrita* for those who want to be elaborate.

This *Panchamrita* ritual has its own logic. Although *pooja* is a spiritual exercise yet the body is the practical participant in the process. A living person can't completely ignore his physical reality. The body is physical reality and the fact of the matter is that it is the foundation of all the spiritual activity. Without it the soul loses its identity. The body must also gets its share in the spiritual exercise. In this case *Panchamrita* is the share of the body which can not be denied to it. It tastes the devotion or faith in the form of *Panchamrita* in the language of its sensory organs.

WHY *PRASADAM?*

After a religious act or ceremony distribution of *prasadam,* a small token of the sweet of the edible kind is also a custom. *Prasadam* partaking with devotion is the consummation act of the religious ceremony, *pooja, katha* or some rites. Through distribution of *prasadam* a man tries to reach to the other in a spiritual way through a physical process.

The logic given in the case of *Panchamrita* applies here also. Then it is the orientation of human mind. After convocation address the degrees are distributed as *prasadam* of the educational *pooja* to the deserving only. After a tournament trophies and the cups are given away. But the religious exercise is not discriminative. Every one taking part in a religious ceremony is spiritually a winner. So, everyone is expected to get the *prasadam.*

WHY *NAIVAIDYA* (FOOD OFFERING)?

'Naivaidya' is food offering to God (Deity, idol). Deity worship time is usually early in the morning. In most of the homes food is cooked early morning as men have to go to work by sunrise. In such cases if the food has been cooked the normal items like rice, *dal* or vegetable food can be offered to the deity. If complete menu is not ready then rice mixed with *ghee* and jaggery sugar can be offered. It can be eaten by the worshiper or better still it must be distributed to others.

During *vrata pooja* of pledged kind *naivaidya* is called *'Prasadam Naivaidya'*. It should be distributed amongst family members and other's present. After offering to deity some people cover the *Naivaidya thali* which is not proper. It has been noticed that some ignorant devotees paste offering into the mouth of deity for better effect which is against the orders of *Shastras*.

If more than one deity has been installed at some religious occasion it is not necessary to say prayers separately to different deities. Just a common prayer to all the deities will suffice. It is the spirit that matters.

WHY CONSIGN IDOLS TO WATERS?

Today the crowds of a large numbers of idols, photographs and statues of gods and goddesses during festivals have become a problem. The members of the family bring home idols from pilgrimages along with pictures and photographs. The idols arrive as gifts also. The homes become virtual museums of god and goddess idols and all of the idols have to be worshiped as tradition. Each god has several idols.

Many idols undergo a lot of wear and tear over the period. Sometimes it becomes difficult to identify the idols. But the people are afraid to dispose them off for fear of the ire of the concerned deity. The problem gets worse and worse as the time passes by. Meanwhile more idol keep coming in every year and at every festival or ceremony. The situation becomes desperate.

One begins to get fed up with all the crowding and the cluttering of the space. Cynicism begins to set in. The young generation folks don't hide their resentment and disenchantment with the idol worship business.

It is all due to the ignorance of the laws and the orders set by *Shastras*. The need is to know the answers contained in the directions of *Shastras* to all kinds of problems. Once you know them the idol worship becomes a fruitful exercise instead of problematic. In respect of *pooja* the first order is that every home must conduct everyday *Panchayatan pooja*. Some of the families do conduct even today *pooja* of *Panchayatans—Vishnu, Shaligram, Narmada Ganapati Quartz—Surya, Suvarnamukhi Devi* and *Shiva Banlinga*. In the holy cities near temples the shops sell *Panchayatana* gods. In this regard the order is that *pooja* house should not be cluttered with idols, images, pictures, photographs, or the coins of the same deity.

In ancient times camera photographs were not there. But today one can have photographs of famous idols of gods and saints or the godmen. These photographs are helpful for the concentration of mind for a period of time. So the *pooja* place can have deity's

or holy man's photo. But beyond this the repetition of the idols or photos or symbols of other gods should be avoided or they will become countless. The photographs and idols brought from the pilgrimages should be used for albums or collections only. They must not be installed in the *pooja* place with the deity worshiped everyday.

The second order is regarding period an idol can be kept for worship purpose according to the material it is made of. The brass and the bronze idol is good for 21 years, silver idol for two generations or 40-45 years and the gold idol is for four generations or 100 years. These periods are determined according to the capacity of the metal to tolerate ointing, chemical reactions, wear and tear. Due to this factor alone the number of the idols in the worship use will be reduced considerably.

The third order is that unrecognisable idols or broken, distorted or twisted ones should not be kept in *pooja* place. The fourth order is that in *pooja* place idols smaller than palm or bigger than palm are undesirable. If we apply these rules the *pooja* room will be automatically a less crowded place.

The homes where there are young people of cynical non-believing atheist kind there is likelihood of the deities being dishonoured in future. The better idea would be to consign the deities with honour to the water. Sometime there are childless couples who are not willing to adopt even then the question is what becomes of the deities of their homes? They too should be consigned to water instead of leaving them to the

fate of going unworshiped. Or the idols should be given to a faithful and willing person.

Following the above orders the consigning of surplus idols or pictures becomes religious duty. On some auspicious day collect such unwanted idols and pictures. Clean the metal idols with lemon peels and ash. Oint them with *Panchamrita*. Offer rice-curd and *Naivaidya Prasadam.*

Then recite *'Yantu Devana Sarve Pujamedaya Parthiveem, Isht Kama Prasidhyartha Purragamnaya cha.'*

Offer raw rice. Put the idol in a new cloth and keep the bundle in a safe place for seven months. It will allow you time enough to get over the bad feeling or correct any mistake if there be.

The deity idols should be properly worshiped everyday and anointed on special religious days as per the ordered custom.

WHAT IS SPECIAL ABOUT SHIVA *POOJA*?

There are various traditions and customs in different sects in respect of Shiva worship. The offerings of consumables, flowers, leaves, fruits and water to Shiva are not partaken by devotees. But there are some sects and individuals for whom Shiva is whole God, not just one of the triumvirate.

They partake the offerings.

If *Shvia* symbol *Shaligram* rock is anointed with funeral pyre ashes then the offering being unacceptable are logical. But the counter point is that *Shaligram* rock being *Shiva* should have the power of cleansing

everything coming into its contact of all aspects of evil effects *Shastra* rules that offerings to *Shiva* are not acceptable.

But *Banlinga* version of *Shiva* is exception.

The tradition is to offer consumables to Lord Shiva immediately after praying because he is considered to be an impatient god. The delay annoys him, so is the religious legend. His idol should not be anointed with water. In *Shiva pooja* the conchshell is not worshiped. Before worshiping Shiva one must apply ashes to one's forehead and *Rudraksha mala* (the string of *Rudraksha* beads) should be worn in the neck.

There are a number of sects of Shiva devotees. Every sect has its own mode of worship. Some sects use various symbolic *lingams* to represent *Shiva*. In Shiva worship, after making offerings conch shell is blown before the main prayer.

WHY SHIVA WORSHIP AT NIGHT?

The 14 day of the descending moon phase of vernacular *Falguna* month (December-January), is celebrated as *'Maha Shivaratri'* by Hindus. That is the night of the grand worships of Shiva. The rest of the gods and goddesses are worshiped during the day but *Shiva* worship is reserved for the night.

On that night devotees religiously celebrate *Shiva* all night long. *'Nath'* sect of his devotees go around after midnight blowing conch shells creating an eerie atmosphere. In the hill areas of deep snow the effect is bizarre.

But why he is worshiped at night?

Lord *Shiva* is the deity of destruction and the dark forces. So, the dark night is naturally dear to him. The night is the time of the predators when they set out to enact nightly destruction of life. The night is also the ender of the daily business life of humans. He goes to sleep temporarily destroying his consciousness. The dark forces set out to torment the world in the form of ghosts, spirits and apparitions.

The dark nights of the descending moon phase encourage criminal and immoral activities.

Shiva is worshiped during this period of darkness to keep him in benevolent mood to keep the dark tendencies in check.

The question is that 14th of the descending moon phase comes every month, so what is so, special about the one of *Falguna* month? Right, all the 14ths are referred to in scriptures are *'Shivaratris'*. But this one is *'Mahashivaratri'* because it occurs in the vernacular last month of the year. It is the last *'Shivaratri'* of the year. In other words it is the final *Shivaratri* fit to be called *'Mahashivaratri'*.

There is one more reason. *'Mahashivaratri'* comes right after the autumn when trees stand denuded of their leaves. All the leaves have fallen down to become a carpet of seasonal destruction over the earth. The trees stand bare providing a picture of desolateness, the happy hunting ground of the dark forces.

WHY FAST AND *JAGRANA* ON *MAHASHIVARATRI?*

Lord Krishna has said in Gita that the working day of a spiritualist begins as the night approaches and he

spends the night in religious endeavours. On *Shivaratri* night the devotees wish to stay awake all night and worship their deity, Lord Shiva. And for that purpose missing night meals is a sensible custom.

Eating would make it difficult to stay awake. Food intake intoxicates the body with satisfaction which induces the sleepiness. Fighting away sleep will be a distraction from the worship and meditation of *Shiva*. *Shiva* is a fierce deity and he won't be pleased with any dilution of the devotion in his faithful.

So, fast and stay awake to pay obeisance to Lord *Shiva* on *Mahashivaratri,* the night devoted to him.

WHY SHOULD WOMEN RECITE *VEDIC MANTRAS?*

Some biased and outdated elements have inserted the ruling in the scriptures that the recitation of *Vedic mantras* are forbidden for women because women have no intellectual scope for understanding *Vedas*.

There always has been gender bias against women. Some ancient scholars also suffered from this bias and allowed their intellect to be poisoned by this bias which resulted in the distortions in the orders of *Shastras*.

Some even take advantage of the physical dissimilarities of man and woman. The women menstruate every month. Instead of taking it merely as a biological process effort was made to create a notion that it was a kind of disability or an unclear process that defiled the female body. A verdict was concocted that she was unfit to participate in any sacred act or religious custom.

But the time has nailed all such falsehoods. The women are proving themselves to be equal to men in every field of human endeavour including sports, adventure, science, literature and creative arts. In some fields they do better than the men. It is unfortunate that even today there is a section of orthodox clergy that is clinging to the biased ruling that women have no right to recite the *mantras* of *Vedas*. Even one of the *Shankaracharyas* articulated his support to such outdated orders. Needless to say that he was severely criticized by all the sections of Indian society. Such are the rulings that bring a bad name to our philosophy although such orders are obviously the mischief of some ancient imposter sages who doctored the scriptures to foist their own narrow minded prejudices on the society through false orders.

We should remember that *Vedas* preach 'Where women are not worshiped there God does not exist.' That is the basic V*edic* principle. Then, where is the room for orders that try to treat women as lowly creatures who do not deserve any religious honour?"

Several religious organisations have rejected such false rulings added to our *Shastras* and ordered that the women have every right to study and recite all Hindu scriptures including *Vedas*. Their ability to read and pronounce *mantras* as correctly as males can not be questioned. There is no scientific ground to believe that *mantras* voiced at different pitches make any difference to their effect or the meaning.

Some mischief mongers did try to put forward an absurd logic that *Vedic mantras* were meant to be

recited at low pitch of voice to retain the religious or spiritual power. Such desperate attempts of the orthodox minds did not succeed and got ridiculed deservingly.

It was also claimed that *mantras* recited by women did not fructify. This point also had no logic behind it. *Shastras* infact rule that even three apex gods of Hinduism, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva are the products of the supreme female force Mahamaya. All the energies and powers are represented by the goddesses. In such liberal philosophy where is the place for such arrogant gender bias?

WHY *'OM'* IS SO SIGNIFICANT?

There is a lots of written literature explaining the significance of 'OM' which actually is pronounced like AOM. Preachers can speak for hours on this word which in vernacular script is represented by a letter, the sixth vowel (ॐ) and a dot added to it to give it nasal tone. This dot added letter encompasses the entire Hindu philosophy and the concept of God and the entire creation.

The legend is that when creator Brahma wishing to know the secrets of knowledges, inspirations and the forces and spirits behind causing him to create, prayed to Science Supreme or Truth Ultimate, the letter ॐ (Om) emerged before his mind's eye. With that insight the truths, realisations and knowledges began to enlighten his mind.

He uttered 'OM' and started making revelations through *vedic* scripts. No knowledges eluded him.

Devanagri script has 44 letters. All letters combine to create the language of *Sanskrit* which can reveal all knowledges, truths and answers to all mysteries through words written or spoken. But the single letter 'OM' by itself enlighten one making the other letters superfluous. It is the truth egg.

It is like the cosmic egg (Brahm+and) which explodes in a big bang creating the galaxies, black holes, space, stars, planets, moons and evolutionary processes, cosmic forces and expanding outward thrust. A time will come the universe will start to contract and eventually go back to become cosmic egg again. It will explode again.

Similarly the truth egg explodes revealing all the facts, realities, truths and knowledges. If ail the knowledges are focussed at one point or are reduced into just one expression it will be 'OM'.

The big bang reality is still vibrating through the universe as humming echo of that mighty explosion, duplicated in the truth egg as 'Ommmmm...'. That is why the chant of 'OM' is prescribed. It the primary sound that heralded all the evolutions and is still echoing. 'OM' is one letter ode to that event.

The sounds that a child first makes naturally is aaa, ooo, mmm which makes 'aom' the pronounced version of 'OM'. It is something connected to a very basic nature phonetically. The Hindu belief calls the universe *'Brahmand'* which literally means cosmic egg. And 'OM' is the sound that reverberates through the cosmos as a result of the big bang. It is completely in conformity with the scientific theory.

In the moments of extreme satisfaction and the contentment the audio expression naturally coming out of the vocal cords is 'Ummm' which again is derivative of 'OM'. And God is the ultimate satisfaction, contentment and joy.

'OM' has been interpreted in thousand ways because it contains the very fundamental cosmic truth. Theists have their own dozens of explanations. And the beauty is that every explanation sounds very logical. A rose differently named in different languages and used in different contexts, version, formats, comparisons, backgrounds and situations smells the same, a scent of romance. Similarly 'OM' gives off the fragrance of the fundamental cosmic truth in whichever way spelt.

This phonetic aspect of 'OM' is not limited to Hindu belief only. In some special respects human mind is effected by some mysterious wave uniformly without discrimination cutting across all religious and cultural lines. Om's parallel in Christianity is 'Amen' and 'Ameen' in Islam. It also proves the correctness of the brotherhood of mankind theory. Deep down entire human religious and emotional feelings are uniform and identical. Same is the case with negative expression. For some undefined reason every culture and society has coined the word for negative reply starting with 'N'. It is 'No' in English. 'Non' in French, 'Nein' in German, 'Nahin' in Hindu, 'Nyet' in Russian and 'Na', 'Nay' 'Nah' etc. in other languages. It proves another Hindu belief that 'God in soul form runs through every creature binding us all spiritually. It seems to be correct by implication.

The scientific theory is that some kind of waves of intelligence keep sweeping the world from time to time. When religious wave hits the people all over the world begin to think on same religious wave length. When radio age comes the scientists all over the world begin thinking of radio waves and frequencies although they have no connection with one another. When atomic knowledge wave sweeps the researchers all over the world start working on fission theories independently. Every one appears to be thinking on the same lines. Now it is the chip revolution. All ideas are revolving around chips.

Shastras have defined various customs of chanting 'Om'. Its chant spiritually attunes one to the cosmic hum of big bang echo which creates the harmony between the chanter and rest of the universe. It results in a feeling of being in peace with the world.

WHY CHANT *MANTRAS?*

It is now an established scientific fact that repetition of acts gives peace and emotional security to the mind. We live in a world that is constantly changing and it creates pressure on mind to change accordingly. The result is tension.

The habits, daily rituals, worships, ceremonies and festivals act as soothing balms because they assure the mind that there is no change really. They come to represent the permanent values. The human mind finds peace anchored to them in the turbulent waters of constant demands for change. As the time makes more demands for changes and as the pressure to adopt new

life style, culture, outlook, work ethic and habits increase we become more dependent on permanent values to find solace.

The people flock to godmen, *babas,* yogis, *sants, swamis* and gurus who preach permanent values of religion which they find soothing.

Thus repeated acts in various forms give solace to mind. For the same reason a man chanting *mantras* can feel at peace. It involves repetition of words which is an antidote of change. The pressure for change was always there in every era but the pressure was so soft that no one cared to research on the fact that traditions, customs and rituals gave certain relief to adherents.

As time progressed and new inventions drastically affected the traditional styles of living, working and thinking. The increased demands for changes made human life full of pressures and tensions. Blood pressure and heart diseases became rampant.

It led to the research on the subject and the 'Future shock' theory emerged that explained how pressure for changes creates the brain benumbing effect.

In the self defence the brain retreats into the safe shelter of traditional customs, rituals, annual fairs, festivals and all those activities that include repetitive acts. The brain draws comfort from the fact the there are things that don't change and they occur unchanged regularly again and again just like old times.

Mantras have been fulfilling this role from the ancient times. Their daily repetitive chant comforted the mind and the faithfuls found themselves at peace with their inner self and the world outside.

The *mantra* chant has one more usefulness in respect of progression. It helps one progress spiritually in a systematic way.

When one begins to chant *mantras* it is combined vocal and mental exercise. Gradually the vocal part becomes less and less audible, Eventually it dies out and mind repeats the *mantra* itself silently. Finally the repetition process ends into the *mantra* changing into a spiritual energy which keeps the mind lit up. That is the stage that every devotee aims to achieve where he can truly claim to have become master of that particular mantra. The person feels the presence of the deity the *mantra* is related to.

Every worship begins with that sublime goal. But can every worshiper or chanter of *mantra* reach that point? No. It is like education.

All people go through schooling and college education process. Every one would wish to win Nobel prize in one's own field. Only a few win Nobel Prize in the end. That does not make education a futile exercise.

The education still proves basic qualification of a person whatever level of station in life he reaches. It becomes the power of the person with which he deals with the life in its every aspect.

Similarly worship improves one's understanding of spiritual aspects of life. It makes a person dutiful, honest, punctual, responsible, kind, compassionate, religious and makes him a person of high moral character. So, not reaching stage of 'Master of *Mantra*' is not a failure really.

Shastras have determined the degrees of the difficulty in pleasing various deities. The deities have been classified accordingly as most easy to attain to the most difficult.

WHY WORSHIP GURU ALONG SIDE DEITY?

Hindu *Shastras* equate guru to deity because he guides the disciple to his final goal. In ancient times guru imparted knowledge without any vested monetary interest. Hence, they were more venerable for pupil. Only interest they had was success of the taught which they considered to be their main reward. Guru was embodiment of the divine spirit of service.

Especially for a person who had not become formally ascetic by renouncing the family and the world, the guru was essential to guide one through the path of spiritual pursuit. As a family man one had to maintain a fine balance between his duties to the family and the spiritual endeavour. This balance was only possible when one delegated his spiritual exercises in the care of the guru's guidance.

So, *Shastras* ordered guru to be treated as a deity to inculcate the required level of reverence to guru to induce more milk of spiritual knowledge out of him. The equation of deity and guru could lead to a situation where the spiritual exercise became common endeavour of guru and the disciple which made the success more feasible.

Shastras call this unification of the purpose *'Deeksha'*. *'Dee'* literally means 'imparted' and *'ksha'* means 'imbiber'. Guru imparted knowledge and the

pupil imbibed it. The aim for the pupil has been set as 'Becoming the extension of guru's knowledge or intellectual conscience.'

Shastras have set some rituals and customs to be exercised in interaction between guru and the *shishya* to maintain the sanctity of the relationship. Some formalities have to be gone through to give it the gravity of tradition.

WHY PAY *GURU DAKSHINA*?

In ancient times at the completion of the education a disciple used to ask guru formally what he could do for the guru for the knowledge imparted to him.

The guru could ask for anything and the disciple fulfilled the demand whatever it took. It could be a sum of money, on object, a promise or a pledge, a condition, a task or anything. It was called *'Guru Dakshina'* an ultimate tribute to the teacher from his grateful student.

And the belief was that unless the disciple fulfilled *'Guru Dakshina'* demand the knowledge imparted would not fructify. Infact it was the final test to see how sincerely the student had received the education and how he valued it. If the student was serious and committed to the education he would naturally value it. And the dedication should prove rewarding.

What education can help a frivolous pupil?

WHY MAKE A WISH?

The religious conduct, faith, meditation and worship as the practices of daily life are divinely rewarding. But when there is lack of faith or religion in

daily life the people resort to making wishes or pledging something to deities in the return to the fulfilment of a certain wish. It is the sign of the acceptance of defeat when all the material efforts fail and the sheer desperation sets in.

Although illogical yet several sects have given it a shape of the accepted custom to draw the devotee to their faith. Sometimes it looks like a brazen attempt to bribe gods or goddesses. In exchange for the grant of wish, the wish maker pledges to perform some religious rite or present something of value. Many Hindu temples, trees, idols or pilgrim centres are famous as wish granters where a wish can be made through a particular ritual. A pledge is made as to what a wish maker would do if the wish is really granted.

Christian faith has wishing well legends or 'wish upon a falling star' traditions. Muslims have their own *'Peer' or 'Fakir' durgahs* where one can make a wish.

There is also a tradition of tying wish invoked threads to pillars, railings or trees.

It is amazing how crowds converge on such wishful places proving the fact that when material efforts fail people turn to gods as a last gamble. In a hopeless situation man hopes for a miracle. It is perhaps the spiritual version of the man's 'Never say die' spirit, the secret of the man's survival against all adversities. It is what makes man superior to animals who accept death and defeat when their physical efforts fail. But the man, in such situations digs deep into his mysterious spiritual depths and comes up with the miracle hope.

The redeeming factor of this phenomenon is that devotees converge at such places cutting across the religious lines. There remains no religious distinction. In the desperate situations humans unite forgetting all their differences.

On this issue it won't be correct to apply the logic angle. Because in a desperate situation man resorts to desperate attempts. A drowning man catches at a straw however illogical it may look.

But there are majority cases where wishes are of a silly kind like a student wishing for the pass marks in the examination, a man asking for the favourable court decision, an employee wanting promotion or for losses in the busyness turning into profits.

Here also there is room for consideration. Such situations might be trivial but for the persons concerned it can be the matters of life and death in their own narrow perspectives.

Whatever is the situation, if the wish is fulfilled by miracle or coincidence the wish maker should fulfil his pledge whatever it costs or takes to do. A person should be true to his commitment and promise must be kept. It is a matter of principle. If he does not he will degenerate. He will grow a habit of making false promises and pledges which eventually will destroy his credibility and finally his social standing. If a breach is allowed to be made in the wall of the moral dam, it will in a very short time blow away the whole structure.

To save one's own conscious and self-respect one should keep up solemn promise made to prevent erosion of his moral values.

Then, there is a psychological angles to it. If a man has basically positive attitude he may get spurred on to put some extra effort to realise what he has made a wish for. This factor also might prove helpful.

WHY WE NEED GOD'S MERCY?

Some people argue that God has given us two hands, two legs, two eyes and the brain, so why should we seek his mercy?

That sounds very arrogant. When we talk of God, we talk of universe and the infinite limits, infinite quantity and infinite qualities. Man is a small creature, on a tiny mud ball of an insignificant star called sun. Against the backdrop of universe our existence is infinitely insignificant.

We are merely silk worms cuccooned in by our physical, emotional and intellectual limitations floating in the expanse of limitlessness for a very short time. Our much touted technology can not even carry us across the solar system in a meaningful time frame.

If we send astronauts to the planet Uranus of our solar system through our present space technology they will come back only at the end of 1600 years. Forget about the other stars, our galaxy and beyond.

So, how funny our achievements are! We can meaningfully reach out to the cosmic realities by linking ourselves to the God force that pervades through the universe and only it can help us to understand what infinity is. Einstein had rightly said that man was just a child playing with pebbles on the sand of the shore of the sea of knowledge.

Every particle of the matter of this cosmos or non-matter or anti-matter is source of some kind of knowledge or source of knowledge. To reach to it we do need a spiritual vehicle because it is beyond the scope of physical science or mechanics.

We seek the mercy of God admitting our own limitations to become a part of the force that is limitless. The humility is good conductor of spiritual energy whereas pride or arrogance is as bad as a piece of dry wood is for the electric energy. On religious plain God is a composite force of all the positive energies. Kindness being a positive quality one can assume that God has limitless amount of it. So, a man shall naturally take advantage of it.

Shastra says—*'Punasya Phalmichchhanti Punyam Naichhanti Manva'* which means a man wants the rewards of good deeds but fails to perform enough good deeds.

And contrary to it he does not want penalties for misdeeds but nevertheless can't help doing them out of his own weaknesses, limitations lack of resistance and being prone to errors. So, he seeks the mercy of God.

Seek mercy but be careful. Don't take it as a licence to indulge in misdeeds willfully.

WHY RELIGIOUS RITES AND CUSTOMS ARE DIFFERENT?

A religious rite is a ritual usually performed by a priest or family priest according to the procedure laid out by scriptures or *Shastras*. It is uniformly practised by the entire society without any transgression or

deviation. All the instructions given by *Shastras* are followed in toto.

But a religious custom is more in the form of a tradition and is influenced by local beliefs, traditions, incidents and cultures. The passage of time also leaves its imprints on a custom by altering it in many ways. Hence religious customs are different in different areas, societies, segments of the societies and even families. Some families introduce their own changes to a custom as a result of some experience of its member or an incident happening in the family at some point of time.

WHAT IS *RUDRAKSHA*?

Shastras order the use of *rudraksha,* the beads in the prayer string of beads. *(Mala)*

Rudraksha is fruit of the tree of the same name. The berry like fruits of the tree dry up into *rudraksha* bead of dark brownish colour. Its size is equal to that of black berry but *rudraksha* is round shaped which makes it a perfect string bead.

The dried up shrivelled skin gives it a distinct character and roughness just ideal for the thumb to turn over. And the weight is right.

It is claimed that *rudraksha* has some medicinal properties and just wearing *rudraksha* string does good to the body.

The mythological legend is that to slay Tripurasura demon. Lord Shiva took *Rudra* incarnation. The tears shed by the eyes of *Rudra Shiva* became *rudraksha.* And it literally means 'Tear of Rudra'. The legend lent

it the sanctity to become the bead of religious abacus. And it matched the Hindu colour, saffron.

Shastras have prescribed bead strings of different numbers of *rudrakshas* for different kinds of chants that invoke the related gods or the goddesses. There also are orders regarding its care, respect and worship.

WHAT'S MEDITATION?

A meditation can be done only if the doer knows what his or her aim or goal is, be it a spiritual goal or aimed deity resolved to be pleased for some blessing.

The true meditation is emptying of the mind of all thoughts except the goal and beaming one's mind on that goal or aim. As the meditation progresses the focus will become sharper and sharper. The highest degree of achievement is the focus getting reduced into a small luminous dot although it is rarely achieved.

The dot can become the enlightenment sought or it can expand into the deity form aimed at finally becoming visible to the mind's eye.

Then, the devotee can claim to have achieved the *darshana* of the deity.

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Chapter-III

PERIODIC FASTS-FESTIVALS

The periodic fasts and the festivals are the soul and the spirit of Hinduism. One may not practise *Anhik,* daily religious customs and conducts or take up complex endeavours of meditation and daily deity worship regime but every Hindu does keep fast at his fancy, or resolve or as personal endeavour for whatever spiritual or physical reasons.

Organising *Kathas* in the fashion of a festival is another Hindu trait. Through *Kathas, Jagranas* and

religious ceremonies he manifests his faith in his religion and at the same time he uses the occasion to pick up the threads of his social life, makes it a family get-together, mends fences with his neighbours and fetes everyone to demonstrate that basically he is a good person who has no ill will towards others. Infact a Hindu derived all those advantages a Westerner did from cocktail parties which included the proverbial 'clinching the deal'. And the practice goes on. Every year most of the families organise some religious custom or the other which is conducted by the traditional family priest or a hired one. In some *kathas* or recitation more than one priest are invited.

In these modern times priest groups speicialised in particular *pooja* or *katha* are available. They have their own musical back up. The families just arrange for space, *shamiana* and mass feast.

Shastras have ordered these religious functions to keep the faithfuls reminded of their duties towards their faith, spiritual progress and the Creator.

A lot a such *pooja's, kathas* and fasts are prescribed for special days or periods of the years. These acts become a tradition of the family and through them individuals get the feeling of belonging to a blood line and continuity. One can touch his roots.

Women folk of the family are most enthusiastic about these customs and zealously perpetuate them. Many of the beliefs smack of blind faith.

But there also is a logic. In our families women are intellectually ignored lot. No one gives any importance to their views. If ever they dare to air their opinion on

any matter concerning the affairs of the family they are cut short by one of the male members with a rude remark implying that she need not spell her stupid ideas. It is kind of extreme mental torture. Women folk wonder if they were really human beings with so called intelligence.

HOW DO WOMEN RETAIN SANITY?

It is here that religious customs, traditions and some rituals based on blatant superstition come handy. Here is a zone where women can assert themselves. For some strange reason men folk in these matters often yield ground to women.

Thus, actually these customs are women's foothold on the sanity. These are the occasions where women folk call the shots. It assures them that they matter after all and are members of the human race.

WHY KEEP FASTS?

The religious fast means not taking food or accepting only what *Shastras* allows in most cases the custom is to take water only and avoid all the solid and liquid foods. In some long duration fasts juice or certain fruits are permitted to be taken if so desired. In some strict fasts even water is not allowed. Such fasts are called *'Nirjala'*.

The fast is prescribed to broken with a semi-liquid vegetarian food for the gentle return to the normal diet.

From the medical point of view no one would disagree over the usefulness of the fasts. It is the best way to keep digestive system unburdened. It is dieting

on the religious format. All the good that dieting does to body is also achieved through fasting with the added benefit of the toning up of mind and the conscience. The dieting is physical beauty oriented while fasting as religious custom is spiritual piety focussed. The regular fasting can keep away obeisity and the diseases related to it. A fast a week can keep one fine tuned which does reflect in his work output and efficiency.

Fasts undertaken as religious custom has several advantages. Dieting through fasting custom makes it a regular regime because it becomes a religious duty and spiritual obligation gets attached to it. Simple dieting just being a weight reducing exercise does not carry any moral commitment and it can be given up at slightest whim or excuse.

But it is different with models who diet religiously because of professional commitment. An ordinary person can create same kind of commitment by aligning his fast to some religious custom. Better a weekly or twice a week commitment would become solemn by following the *Shastra* orders regarding the chosen fast. Once it becomes spiritual obligation one will carry on the fast regime religiously and there will be little danger of its being given up.

The fasting involves self control and some sacrifice. After a period of regular fasting the spirit of sacrifice and controlled conduct will enhance one's moral character which will raise the person's social and professional status undoubtedly. The commitment to fast will make one conscious of piety and the noble values in him will rule the fasting day or the period. A

fasting person tends to grow into a better and better person.

The prominent fast regimes prescribed by *Shastras* are *Mangal Vrata, Nirjala Ekadashi, Purnmasi Vrata, Shukra Vrata, Shani Vrata, Grahan Vrata, Shivratri Vrata,* one meal a day *Vrata* etc.etc.

Remember that fasting is the way to disciplined life professionally and spiritually. The former can earn you success and the latter may open the doors of heaven for you.

Thus a fast is the fast channel to success and God.

WHY WORSHIP VIRGIN GIRL?

Every year Hindus enthusiastically observe a nine day *Navratra.* This nine day period is dedicated to Goddess Durga, whose nine dimensions are celebrated one each day. It is a nine day stretch when a devotee sticks religiously to vegetarian diet. During this period drinks are avoided. Some people voluntarily forego sex also as it is considered a violent act.

This period breaks the monotony of routine life and injects a new discipline of *Navratra* regime. It is like annual spiritual refresher course. The women have great stake in it and most of the worships and other rituals are female oriented. The atmosphere in the society and families become charged with feminine preferences and enthusiasm. The scenes are dominated by activities in homes and markets.

Male domination so visible in everyday life takes a break for a change. It is religious way of enforcing the principles of equality of man and woman in the importance in the life of the society.

Navratra celebrations culminate in feeding and worshiping young virgin girls.

Hinudism believes in the universal creative forces to be feminine gender. The very original force is Mahamaya whose inspiration created the gods and the rest of the cosmos. The inspiration is the life force of the entire creation. All the major and minor energies and forces are represented by various goddesses. *Navratra* deity Durga and all her dimensions are believed to be the manifestations of the same basic inspiration Mahamaya.

Thus, a virgin girl is the symbol of the pure basic creative force according to this philosophy.

KAALI MA

One of the dimensions of Durga is Kaali *Ma*, the fierce goddess revered by Hindus. These dimensions has some very startling scientific facts.

Kaali Ma literally translated means Black Mother.

The recent scientific researches on the origins of human species reveals that the entire human race irrespective of colour and sizes can be traced back to one woman of African origin. The colours, sizes and features changed over a long period of times as man migrated to the different parts of the globe in the Ice Age. Those who moved in the colder regions of the west and the Europe underwent changes of pigment to become white or red. The groups who moved towards North East became pale, short and flat noses. Other developed other shades of colour and features.

But the family tree of every race leads back to one

African woman who can truly be called the mother of the human race, a black woman represented in Hindu religion as *'Kali Ma'*, the black mother. *Kaali Ma's* posture is tongue hanging out symbolically conveying the message that she was flesh eater. The tradition is of offering sacrifice of bull buffalo to her. Indian bull buffalo is like African wilder beast which no doubt was the main source of the food of that black woman.

Ancient scriptures in incredible ways appear to reveal the scientific facts what we are discovering today. Then, there is the mention of the world *'Patal'* where there were only snakes of all kinds. Are they referring to the reptile age? There also is mention of worlds of *Rakshasas, Daityas* and *Avadhoots* that uncannily resemble the creatures of Jurassic Age. *Daitya* hints towards dinosaur's gigantic size.

It is sad that no one has cared to do extensive research on our *Shastras* in this light.

WHY CONSIGN GANAPATI IDOL TO WATERS?

Every year *Ganapati Bappa* festival is celebrated with much fanfare especially in Maharashtra. Traditionally every household has its own idol for worshiping. Then there are giant Ganapati statues in community centres. The festival is celebrated every year. At the end of the celebration the custom is to ceremoniously carry the idols to the sea or river front and consign them to the waters. At places the lakes are also used for this purposes.

The tradition of consigning the idols to the waters

is logical. If this practice is not carried out then after the celebrations the people would lose interests in the worship and there is danger of the deity idols through neglect and carelessness subjected to some unitended dishonour which can hurt the faith and lower the respect of the deity. In homes the same problem will arise. As the custom is to instal new idol every year there will arise space problem if the idols are not disposed off through some honourable custom.

The small living spaces of Indian homes can hardly accommodate one idol.

Then, there in the question of the livelihood of those thousands of people whose profession is to make idols. Only consigning the idols at the end of the celebrations can guarantee the demand of new idols in the new year to keep them in business. From whichever angle we look the custom of consigning the idols to the water is necessity although now it is creating water pollution problem as newer kinds of idols and statues are being made from the synthetic material that is not bio-degradable.

This problem can become acute as the demand for the idols are likely to keep rising every year due to the increase in the purchasing power of the people. We are today spending more on celebrations.

The religious authorities need to look into this matter and work out an acceptable solution.

WHY WISH UPON A BANYAN?

In Hindu religion trees have great importance. *Vedas* order every faithful to plant and rear five trees in

his life time as a part of his religious duty. Those trees are advised to be treated as brothers. It recognises the basic fact that all living entities are basically related as they are all living manifestations of God force.

At cell level humans and plants have similar structure. In origin we are siblings.

Our sages meditated under trees and gained their wisdoms. They all selected banyan trees because they provided extensive overhead protection from heat and rain. And Bodhi tree under which Buddha attained enlightenment is also a banyan.

Holy men and preachers also select banyan tree to camp under and impart knowledge to others. In ancient times and even today teachers hold their classes under banyan trees. Banyan is related to our education in various ways from 'ABC' to spiritual enlightenment.

Various trees are worshiped in Hindu tradition for different reasons besides medicinal values and fruits. They are considered living gods that breathe Oxygen into us and make our wishes come true.

Women worship *banyans* wishing long life for their husbands. They tie cotton threads around banyan trunks while making their wish. It is perhaps symbol of long life. Every banyan tree has seen generations of a family come and go. They are witnesses to history like sentinels of time.

Naturally the belief also took roots that a banyan tree can bless one with a long life.

WHY VISHNU IN THE SEA OF MILK?

Hindu religion believes that the three gods—

Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva are manifest forms of Unmanifest God. Brahma creates, Vishnu supports the creations and inspires evolutions and finally Shiva destroys all through doom.

The milk is the symbol of kindness and basic support of life as it literally fosters a newborn. The kindness and support medium are needed to keep the creations alive and thrive.

There is a scientific theory as well. It is foreseen that millions of years down the line new ice age will begin which will violently shock the current life forms forcing a fresh evolution of life like the last Ice Age affected. In a likely scenario the sea will become a churning mass and its entire surface will be covered with a great layer of white foam making it look like milkshake. A gigantic sea creature spread over hundreds of kms. is supposed to evolve which will be like a mindboggling flotilla which will have thousands of hood like projections grown upwards. It will cast down thousands of tubular suspensions going deep into the sea to suck in life support foods.

Lord Vishnu is supposed to be reclining on thousand hooded *Sheshnaga* in the sea of milk, *'Kshirsagara'*. The scene is uncannily similar. We can visualise Vishnu as the evolutionary spirit.

For the *Shastras* it has already happened but for the science it is to happen, the *Sheshnaga*, Vishnu and sea milk phenomenon.

WHY DOES LAXMI PRESS THE FEET OF VISHNU?

In our scriptures goddess Laxmi is visualised as

pressing the feet of reclinings Lord Vishnu. Laxmi is manifestation of basic Force Supreme that inspired the entire creation. Yet why should the Creator be serving the created? This is a puzzlę.

The religious scholars explain that Laxmi represents the inspiring force while Vishnu is responsible for the actual act of sustaining the universe. By pressing the feet of Vishnu goddess Laxmi is paying tribute to the labour. In other words inspiration accepting the superiority of perspiration because Vishnu is actually performing the toiling part of the task.

Or is there trace of male chauvinism? Because even sages were not free of prejudice against the women. Often it betrayed their own wisdom and sagacity. The reader is free to draw his own conclusions.

WHY LAXMI RIDES AN OWL?

Mythological belief is that the goddess of prosperity Laxmi uses the owl as her private carrier. Whenever she accompanies her husband Lord Vishnu his carrier the divine eagle serves the purpose.

It is symbolic concept. Laxmi goes on her own mostly to bless those who aspire for wealth, money and material prosperity. The owl is the symbol of wisdom in the West but in Hindu philosophy it is the symbol of stupidity. And of course it is nocturnal creature. So, in our context we can assume that it points to foolishness and darkness.

Hindu philosophy firmly believes that spiritualism is the true human endeavour and the goal of life is the

union with Creator. The pursuits of material gains is looked down upon as a stupid act of a person who has not seen the light of the spiritual wisdom to know that the real treasure is love for God. Only the ignorant seek gold, gems and riches that will keep them trapped in the birth and the death cycles for ever.

WHY ANIMAL INCARNATIONS?

Hindu *Shastras* believe that God has taken at least ten incarnations. Among those incarnations are in the forms of Fish, Turtle and Boar. Many people make fun of it and argue why God would take incarnations as lowly creatures? Many faithfuls even don't appear convinced about the logic of this animal incarnation part of the mythological legend.

And there is no dirth of people who make these stories an example to prove that the entire mythological literature is figment of imagination of ancient minds.

But the objective analysis tells a different story. We must remember that religious concepts were the first scientific endeavours to know 'What we are'—'What are stars, sun, earth, moon and other heavenly objects'—'What is the purpose of our life'?????? etc. etc. As we have already theorised how Hindu concepts of *'Patal Lok'*, *'Rakshasha Lok'*, *'Kaali Ma'* etc. are based on uncanny scientific logic. Similarly the animal incarnations concepts has the logic of life evolution on the earth.

For God force no creature represents a lowly life. Creator should be loving all its creations irrespective of form, size, shape, domain, habitat or life style. We must

not categories life forms as lowly or superior ones according to our own concepts of good or bad and superior or inferior.

Even the worms when seen or videographed through microscopic or telescopic lenses reveal how carefully and lovingly the nature has designed them. In its own right every creature is a beauty and the darling of its Creator. In every life form for a mother her baby is the most beauteous thing of the universe.

So is every creature to God. We have no right to apply our biased and prejudiced judgement on others.

Why would God take incarnation as a fish or turtle?

It has been established by scientific research and accepted by all that the life on earth began in sea as a single cell 'amoeba'. Then multi-cellular creatures evolved. The first composite creature to come into existence was fish. Several types and species of the fish evolved. For crores of years fish was the only creature to inhabit this earth besides plants of planktons and lichen kind.

During that age fish was naturally the living manifestation of God.

In the second stage amphibians evolved. They were the fish who ventured out of sea to creep on the land. Gradually they evolved into creatures who could live in the water and on the land as well.

The turtle represented such early amphibians. It was amphibian manifestation of God force. Turtle incarnation of Lord Vishnu (Provider and the Inspirer of evolutions) should be seen in this light, the divine recognition of crustation reality.

Then reptile age began on earth. Lord Vishnu recognised this phase of evolution by declaring one of its products to be his personal attendant in the form of *Sheshnaga,* the thousand hooded reptile, the king of *Patala* (reptile age).

Jurassic age was given recognition through concepts of *Daityas* (Dinosaurs), *Rakshashas* (Dinosaurs and other ferocious looking predatory types of dinosaurs). Vishnu recognised the evolution of flying creatures by accepting one of its highly evolved type 'Eagle' to be his personal carrier and the nocturnal owl to be his wife Laxmi's carrier.

Now how could a four legged creature be denied divine recognition? It was done by the concept of boar incarnation. By why boar? Perhaps, because a boar combines the features of predators and grass eaters.

Then, highly evolved two legged creature with intelligence arrived in the form of the human. So, he took incarnation as (man-lion) Narasimha, Vamana, Parshurama, Rama, Krishna, Buddha and the messiahs of the other religions to give his best manifestation. Even *homo-erectus* has been given due recognition by introducing *Hanumana* as the greatest servant of God.

So, we can see that the story of incarnations is infact symbolic revelation of the stages of evolution of life on earth. At the end of the present age it is predicted that God will manifest Himself through 'Kalki' incarnation.

WHY NOT VIEW MOON ON *CHATURTHI*?

The *Puranic* legend is that when Ganesha was chosen as prime worshipable god, all the gods paid

obeisance to him. Ganesha saw that Moon was casting a funny look at his unshapely body. It angered Ganesha. He put a curse on Moon, "Moon, the brightness you pride over will become tainted."

Moon realised his mistake and apologized. Then, Ganesha said, "Alright, now on you will shine only with sunlight and only once a week shall you fully shine. And no human will caste a glance on you on *Bhadra Chaturthi* day. Anyone doing so will get tainted like you".

The religious scholars explain that on *Chaturthi* day the moon shines with the killer rays of the sun. The theory is that sun released death rays or life rays on certain days. This theory is untested or analysed. But we can't outrightly reject the theory. There can be some other explanation as well. After all we know that full moon days trigger madness in some people. Some say it happens due to some unexplained magnetic or gravitational force. Can't some similar phenomenon be attached to *Chaturthi* day?

WHY AVOID EATING DURING ECLIPSE?

Shastras forbid eating food during eclipse periods. Indirectly ancient sages believed that during eclipse food got defiled which became unsafe for consumption. Food is advised to be taken only after a through bath.

A scientist named Torinston did a research on the matter and discovered a strange fact that during the eclipse digestive systems of creatures especially that of humans got adversely effected. *Shastras* rule that 10

hours before an eclipse the environment begins to be infected with space pollution.

This period is called *'Sutak Kaal'*.

After eclipse its is advised that vegetables and food material should be treated with *'Tulsi'*. *Tulsi* plant is supposed to contain some disinfectant qualities.

WHY IS *TULSI* GOOD?

Tulsi plant is glorified in *Shastras* as unique divine plant. Every home is advised to plant a *Tulsi* in its courtyard or in flower pot. It will make the place holy like a pilgrim centre.

It is claimed that wherever there is Tulsi plant there *Yama,* the god of death will not enter.

What it really means is that wherever there is *Tulsi* there good health reigns and the death stays away.

Women are advised to worship *Tulsi* every day to keep away widowhood. It again was based around the belief that *Tulsi* had miraculous curative powers. In Ayurveda medicine science several medicines were prescribed that were made of various parts or derivatives of *Tulsi* for different diseases. Even Tulsi tea is used by several people as medicine or preventive drug. The women were asked to worship *Tulsi* plant perhaps to induce them to have *Tulsi* in home environments.

The sages were so enamoured with the health giving qualities of *Tulsi* that it was made a part of mythological legends.

It was and is still believed that *Tulsi* purifies the air better than the other plants. Its smell has disinfection

qualities which keeps the air free of unspecified bacteria that can cause serious afflictions.

The powers lent to *Tulsi* by mythological legends and the orders of *Shastras* do create a psychological mindset that is positive and might be effective in biological immune systems kept awakened and active.

But one thing in clear that the *Tulsi* legend keeps the women of the families oriented to piety and religion. The pious family environment makes the men folk also, to remain straight and not indulge in drinking or drugs. That indirectly can do a lot of good. The *Tulsi* phenomenon can work in many ways.

WHY *PEEPAL* TREE IS WORSHIPABLE?

Hindu religion has great respect for the nature because it believes that plant and trees are the manifestations of God. The trees were planted in our mythology as divine legends to inspire reverence to trees in the minds of the faithfuls so that the trees and the forests prospered.

Some medicinal and other useful trees were specially selected for protection through legends according to importance perception of the old times.

Peepal was one of the selected trees for making them worshiped by the populace through glorification in the legends. The peepal was one of the very common trees that grew around human settlements. The tree was large and everyone could guess its usefulness in terms of greenery value, cooling the breeze and providing shade to people in the hot summers. But its large and tall size and proximity to human settlements could

make it an easy target of human needs of timber and fire wood. It could only be protected by lending it strong legends.

So, *Shastra* ruled that the glory of Vishnu lived in *peepal* tree. It was said that the *peepal* represented all the pilgrim centres.

The custom of worship of *peepal* tree was introduced. Several religious rites were ordered to be performed only under *peepal* tree.

Botanists say that *peepal* tree expels oxygen all 24 hours of the day uniformly while other trees dod it only during nights more efficiently.

WHY *SWASTIKA* IS HOLY SIGN?

In Hindu philosophy *swastika* is considered the most holy sign. It is symbol of prosperity. The symbol itself is geometric form of prayer to the divine forces to grant riches, pleasure, happiness and all round welfare.

Shastra rule that it is the symbolic sign of the goddess of the prosperity, *Ma Laxmi*. As *Laxmi* is the wife of Lord Vishnu the sign also invokes his blessings. *Rigveda* rules that the *swastika* is the sign of Sun-god. Ganesh *Purana* also claims that *Swastika* represents Ganesha.

Some religious scholars believe that it is the symbolic figure of *Sudarshan Chakra,* the divine weapon of the Lord God. Swastika is attributed to possess the divine powers of spreading goodness, gains and turning negative into positive factors.

That is why businessmen put *swastika* sign on their ledgers and safes to bring in more profits and gainful trade. Common folk paint *swastika* signs on their doors

or door side wall wishing for prosperity and the resultant happiness and good life. During festive occasions womenfolk specially draw *swastika* signs for the unmarred continuation of celebrations.

What exactly is Hindu *swastika* sign and why our *Shastras* emphasize its importance for the progress and the well being?

It is mathematical plus (+) sign which means addition of gains. The tips of the arms of the plus sign have clockwise extensions bent inwards in arc shape. It gives *swastika* the impression of a wheel. Then four dots are added at the crossing point on the four angles 卐-*Shastra* rules that the four dots represent four directions.

It can be explained in other way. The *swastika* is suggestive of a wheel which is infact the original invention that rolled out the entire spectrum of industrial progress. The wheel is the very sign of industry. It also is the best symbol of speed. Entire modern progress and prosperity is the spin off of the wheel. The first complex machine made by man was clock or watch. A clock is combination and alignment of different size wheels. The clock technology gave birth to other machines. Those countries that worked on wheel soon became the driving forces of the world. Even today the wheels of the machines are determining the flow of prosperity and the progress.

The arms of the *swastika* can be naturally symbolic of wheel spokes and the dots are pins or screws. A *swastika* pictures a wheel at work.

That makes perfect sense.

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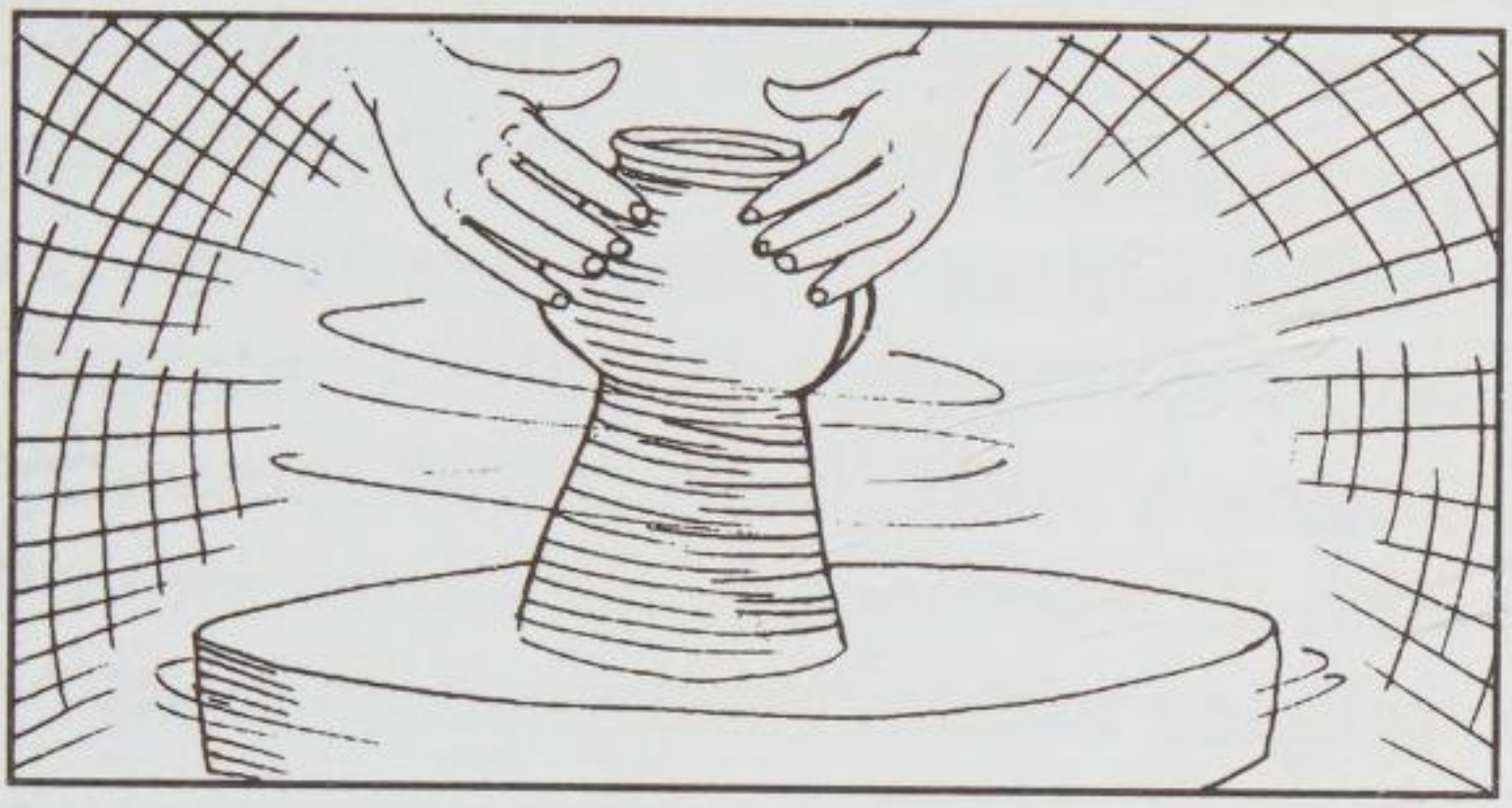

Chapter-IV

TRADITIONS & CUSTOMS

Anhik, conducts worship and spiritual pursuits are the different aspects of the religion. Cultural traditions are souls of the religion as it is the product of the values inculcated by the religion in the society. It reflects in the character of a society and in its members. The traditions repeat themselves and become habits that stay with a person till his end. They even get imbibed by soul and are carried forward to the next lives. Hindu religion is thus based on the foundation of firm

traditional values. That is the real secret of its undestructiveness and the survival through all testing times.

The traditions are like smelters which process a person's character and give it the shine like smeltering produces the gleaming metal as the finished product. They shape a person's mindset and polish the character.

The traditions set by Hinduism is the practical application of the sublime thoughts contained in the scriptures namely *Vedas, Smritis* and *Puranas (minus the mischievous insertions by the vested interests).*

The religion ordered traditions and customs are performed in the presence of the fire. The fire is the witness to all the customs, traditions and rites. Any ritual done in the absence of fire is as raw as uncooked food or as unacceptable as a document written in pencil on a fig leaf.

All the major acts of a Hindu's life are required to be put through a proper custom, ritual, tradition or ceremony to lend it the religious solemnity and sanctity. Many modern people pooh-pooh the tradition and customs without realising that there is some sound logic and scientific reasons behind them. They are infact the water mark that distinguishes a human life from the life of an animal. The only unfortunate things is that several religious orders have been misinterpreted, misdirected, misunderstood and misused by vested elements in the religious hierarchy for exploitation of the masses. Or it is merely shallow knowledge of the ritualistic priests that gave bad name to the customs.

We are trying to provide some explanations.

WHY CASTE SYSTEMS?

The caste systems proposed by Hindu *Shastra* is not what they were and still are being practised. Brahmin scholars deliberately misinterpreted the letter and the intent of the *Shastras* to make the highest category as their own family preserve.

Vedic sages propounded the caste theory taking the society as one huge body symbolising a person—*'Brahnanosya Mukhanasid'*. Bahu *Rajanya Krite Uru Tadasya Yadavaishya, Padabhyam Shudroojayate.'* It means the society person produced *Brahmin* from mouth, *Kashtriya* from arms, *Vaishya* from belly and *Shudra* from the feet.

This categorisation was in relation to the function of the parts of the body. The word caste in *Shastras* merely means category. And not something a person was condemned to by birth. Any one born could fall into any category according to his capacity and the vocation he took to in life.

Brahmins here merely referred to the academic category. In today's application *Brahmin* category can include all scholars writers, teachers, professors, intelligentsia members and generally educated people with academic pursuits. Knowledge is not something that is inherited property. It has to be learnt through hard work and intelligent brain. The traditional Brahmins interpreted it as a birth right and messed up the Hindu society to make it an irrational society. A Brahmin, even if an idiot could stake claim to the *Noble Prize* for literature for writing nothing.

Kshatriya was meant to be the ruling class since in the ancient times only the warriors ruled the lands. Then, the sword decided who would be the king. Even the princes, having the inherited right to the throne needed the support of warriors. Or the neighbourhood king would march in with his warriors to claim the throne. Only a warrior prince could command the respect of his warriors. So, power was a warrior's game.

Today we live in a different world. The power game has shifted to the politicians and the captains of the industry. The warrior or soldier is no more power player except in military dictatorships. In the Indian context the politicians and the captains of the industry can be classified as the *Kshatriyas*. After all the politicians today fight the battle of the ballot on a different format. The traditional soldiers are today merely a back up force. But for a long time *Kshatriyas* also took advantage of misinterpreted caste theory to make themselves direct partners to the rulers.

Today warriors are members of the armed forces, sports persons, adventurists, actors, actresses and models because they rule our mind and hearts. They all combine to become the ruling class of modern times.

Vaishyas are trade and commerce people. That is a wide and big segment of the population.

Shudras is a word that has been used in a very derogatory sense to mean the 'lowly people'. *Shudra* infact means person who individually might count little *(Shudra)* but as a group they become work force.

They are the people who provide services. They can include government servants also, workers of public service undertakings and people in private sector services.

The castes were only professional categories. The castes have been compared to various parts of the society person. No part of the body is despised. If *shudras* have been compared only to our feet. Do we desire to dispose off our feet? We respect and take care of our feet like any other part of our body. We don't consider feet to be the untouchable part of our body.

In the today's world the feet wear the most expensive accessory of the human dress, shoes.

Then why in the society so-called *Shudras* were degraded into untouchables? That is how several ruling and the orders of our *Shastras* were horrendously misinterpreted and misused to mistreat a section of the human society.

In a way our sages had followed the rules of the nature. A bee colony has different kinds of bees namely queen bee, care taker bees, worker bees, scout bees etc. In the ant colony there are a separate section of soldier ants. But the difference is that in bee colonies and ant hills worker bees and ants are not treated as untouchables. All the types of bees and ants are treated as equals and important sections of their societies.

Similarly the idea of castes was conceived to create an orderly society of various professional groups. It was not meant to create social divisions and to spread the hatred.

WHY CO-*GOTRA* MARRIAGES ARE FORBIDDEN?

Hindu *Shastras* strictly forbid marriages between co-*gotra* members. *Gotra* is indicative of blood relationship.

Now it is an established fact of science that marriage between members of the same blood (Dynasty or clan wise) line is unhealthy. The offspring of such unions develop serious genetic defects leading to deformity, physical handicaps or mental retardedness. The more diverse the blood line the more healthy are the offspring. Nature also follows this rule.

There is definite indication that a genetic diktat is imprinted on our cells which inspires us to fall in love with a members of the different group or race.

It is this effect which results in the youths of enemy clans falling in love with each other and giving birth to love legends the world cultures are replete with. It is a natural phenomenon, a part of the evolutionary agenda of improving the breeds of various species.

WHY TIE KNOT IN MARRIAGE?

Tying the knot in the marriage ceremony is a very sacred custom. It is symbolic act of making a solemn commitment. Such rituals make a ceremony a memorable event.

The corner of the bride's saree is knotted with the corner of the shoulder cloth (Dupatta) of the groom symbolically uniting the two in the holy union.

It is hoped that the two will stand by each other throughout their lives. The knot contains a coin,

flower, turmeric bulb, *dhurva* leaf and rice grains. The couple must understand the symbolic importance of those items.

The coin is the symbol that the money between the two will the common property.

The flower is the sign of happiness and good wishes to each other. The turmeric symbolises health and knowledge meaning that in case of illness they will take care of each other and keep each other healthy. They will share the knowledge and keep it updating.

Dhurva is the token of piety and evergreen state. If dry leaf of *dhurva* is put in water it turns green. It is a promise to keep the love evergreen. The rice is the symbol of wholesomeness.

The wedding knot contains the sacred message of marital life.

WHY SEVEN ROUNDS AROUND FIRE?

Fire is the sun's representative on the earth. In the marriage the presence of the parents of the groom and the bride is naturally imperative. It is the world over so. But in Hindu rites the presence of the fire is also a must.

It is the recognition of the fact that Sun is our foster father. His presence should be the most desirable. Our *Shastras* recognised this scientific fact. After all sun is our life. The trees grow up on the energy provided by the sunlight. The wood infact is stored sunlight. When we burn wood we invoke sun to show up as fire. All the food we eat contain stored energy of the sun which they soak in from the sun light. Hence, in the real sense the sun is our foster father and in every religious rite of Hindu society the presence of fire is a must.

On the solemn occasion of wedding, as fire, the father sun, the very source of our life energy, stands witness to the union of his foster children. The couple go around the fire seven times. Each round is pledged to an aspect of the marital life and the commitments of the groom and the bride to each other.

However *Vedas* order only four rounds. The first three rounds are led by the bride. The fourth round headed by the groom. Symbolically it is so believed that the earlier part of the married life will be dominated by the wife. But the last phase of life when the couple is expected to go in the spiritual quest the male partner is advised to lead.

WHY MARRIED WOMEN APPLY VERMILLION?

In Hindu culture married women apply red vermillion (Sindoor) in the parting of their hair. The widows don't apply it. Only the women who have living husbands display it.

It is very sentimental act. After all the marriage is the union of two hearts which is a very intimate affair. It is symbolic expression of love. At the time of the wedding the groom applies red vermillion to the parting of the bride's hair.

It is just like saying 'Now you are my wife'.

Then on, a young wife applies vermillion to her forehead to symbolically announce 'I love you'. Hindu society is not very vocal. Symbols are used to convey many sentiments. In the west newly marrieds say 'I love you' umpteen times everyday. They like to be

assured of being loved even if they know that they love each other. Or they keep it saying through kisses.

In the crowded joint families of India it is unthinkable to do so. So, symbols are used to express the feelings which is okay for the family censor board. After initial passion months the women used to apply it only on special occasions.

Then, at a point of time of our history the events gave a new role for the vermillion to play.

The women again began to apply vermillion every day as it became the symbol of protection. When Muslim forces invaded India they indulged in plunder, rape and abduction of young women.

No woman's honour was safe. Later, the locals discovered that Muslim soldiers used to spare the married women because Islam forbid touching of another man's wife. Most of the invading soldiers were religious fanatics who abided by the cardinal tenets of their holy book or the order of their clergy.

Thus, the Hindu women displayed vermillion prominently to announce their marital status. Vermillion *(Sindoor)* became the women's saviour. The practice continued when the Englishmen arrived although they were no married women shy. Still the women felt safe due to psychological effect.

In independent India in the beginning years application of vermillion began to lose popularity as the women felt normally liberated and secure and forgot its cultural and religious value.

But movies picked up the cause of the vermillion and made it a part of their stories. *Sindoor* became

symbol of Indian culture and women's piety. It returned as a fashion. Then the countrymen suddenly discovered the value of their own Hindu culture when the western culture seemed to overtake them.

The scientific facts came to the rescue of *sindoor* when they proved that a person or a society needed to cling to its own culture in self-defence against the future shocks generated by breakneck technological advancements made by mankind in the later part of the 20th Century. Or the snowballing future threatened to toss away the societies like rudderless boats.

As an emotional anchor the people rediscovered the value of *sindoor* and its traditional and religious importance was again accepted. In Hindu culture, red, colour is symbol of romance and auspicious feeling. The *tilak* is basically red, *bindi* is traditionally red and the bride wears red dress on the wedding day. The holy flower lotus is also red.

Incidentally, roses also used to be red.

But all good things of our culture are marred by bad elements of the society. They made *sindoor* an excuse to torment the unfortunate women who had lost their husbands. The very word *sindoor* came to be used to mentally torture the widows. It is the sad story of our culture. A knife meant for useful work is more often than not used to inflict wounds and the makers of the knives are blamed for it.

WHY SHOULD A WIFE WEAR *MANGALSUTRA?*

A Hindu wife always wears a chain called

Mangalsutra in her neck. The chain usually has a locket as well. At the time of the wedding the groom puts it in his bride's neck.

It became the most precious and prized possession for the wife which she cares and guards like her own life. It virtually becomes the sign of her marital bliss and the symbol of her husband. With it is around her neck she emotionally feels close to her man. It is her emotional security.

The *Mangalsutra* prescribed is stringed black pearls and locket with the image of a peacock. The peacock in Hindu culture is the symbol of love and dedication. In Indian families husband and wife find little time to stay together even after marriage. During the day the wife has to stay clubbed with women folk, such is the joint family set up. There was a period when too much togetherness of the couple was socially seen as an act of shame. The couple only met for a few hours at night, from midnight to dawn. In many cases husbands stayed away from homes for earning livelihood.

Hence, women needed some token of love or object customised as the symbol of her husband to keep close to heart for the emotional and psychological security. It was natural that the women added lots of their own superstitions to it to make it more intimate. They became so attached to it that the very thought of losing it or a damage to it scared them. And it is still so.

But that does not give us any right to call *mangalsutra* a symbol of silly feminine superstition. The very purpose of it is to provide emotional security to women in the given joint family set up.

WHY MARRIAGE RITUALS?

In Hindu marriage the bride and groom go through a long drawn rituals spread out over a period of several weeks. Before wedding the day groom and the bride are put through a series of rituals in their own homes after engagement. The bride goes through local beautification processes. The rituals of the marriage mainly are—*Haldi, Muhurt Neevam, Vangnishachayam, Manda Deva Poojanam, Shishtacharam, Gaurihara Poojan, Var-Vadhu Nerikshanam, Akshataropanam, Malarpanam, Madhuparkam, Kanyadanam, Mangalsutra Bandana, Vivah Havanam, Sapatpadi, Erinidanam, Vadhu Grihha Praveshanam, Laxmi Poojanam, Namakaranam, Devakothapanam* and family traditions. It is as complex and elaborate as coronation of a king. Add to it the plethora of local customs of different regions and different sects.

WHY SO MUCH BOTHER?

Many modern folk might say what is the use of such ritualistic parade and the wastage of time?

There is logic. The wedding is once a life time affair. So, it is intended to make it a memorable affair as there is no pre-marriage romance in Indian alliance. The long drawn rituals compensate for that shortage. The elaborate weddings emphasise on the couples that the union is the most solemn event of their lives and that they must remain true to each other.

It has the psychological effect on the couple and Indian marriage are the most stable in the world. If we

take out these rituals the seriousness will evaporate in the same ratio and the union will be shorn of much of its sanctity.

And it should be remembered that the life of an Indian has been a grind, a barren repetition of the days. Every day is the repeat of yesterday. For both husband and wife life is so stereotyped that nothing new ever happens. And the life ends at that note. The marriage is the only high point of their lives.

So, it deserves to be given a special treatment.

There are several post-marriage rituals, customs, traditions and rules also.

WHY *VANPRASTHA*?

Hindu scriptures advise that a person should spend last part of his life in the forests in spiritual pursuits. The order is that when a person's son raises his own son, a grand child is born, the hair become grey and the skin starts to shrivel he/she should bid good bye to the family life and set out for the forests to make preparations to meet the Creator.

This order has a great wisdom behind it and today we are realising it more clearly than ever before.

In ancient times our families had small houses. The families were poor and the joint family system was the rule. The homes were ever becoming more and more crowded. Sending the old folks to forests created space and they were spared the situation where the oldies could see painful signs of their being unwanted.

To day we see around us how old folks who are still living with the families are being treated. They are

being subjected to abuse and cruelty. They are forced to live in the dark corners of the homes uncared for and completely neglected. In many cases the greedy descendents don't mind even in murdering them in cold blood to lay their hands on whatever little property the old folk own.

The homes for the old are full of sad old stories. It clearly shows how cruel a society can become towards its old members.

Our sages had devised religious formula of life to remove the old folks from the society to save them from the horrors of the harsh realities of the world.

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Chapter-V

LAST RITES—SHRADDHA IMPIETY PERIODS

The last rites are not only concerned with the body of the dead but the departed soul as well. For three days after the death the rites are dedicated to the dead body and the soul. After that all the rites are directed at the soul. Hinduism believes that for one year the departed soul wanders alone which it termed as *'Ghostate'* (The state of ghost). The rites have been devised according to this concept.

WHY ELECTRIC CREMATION IS OKAY?

When the religious orders were set and related scriptures were worded the electricity had not been invented. The lightning was the only form of electric charge the man had knowledge of but that was taken as natural phenomenon.

No one had even imagined that some day such electric charge would be under the control of man's finger tips and it would take over the several functions of fire the man had use for. Today electricity is the main source of light, several heating and burning processes.

The electric crematoriums also came up to supplement the traditional cremation grounds.

Naturally there is no order on the acceptability of electronic cremation process. The only clear order is that after the death a body must be fully cremated and turned into ashes. There is no controversy on this point. The only issue is the fuel to make fire for burning the body.

Here different fuels are in use to make the fire or pyre. Some use sandal wood, poor people can afford ordinary wood only, there are some areas where cow dung is used, and in emergencies and the wartime situations even kerosine or petrol is used. So, different fuels have been used in different situations and different locations.

The basic idea is to turn the dead body into ashes which is required for other posthumous rites. In the conventional wood cremation the ashes means a mixture of the burnt residue the body and the burnt wood or ashes. The more the inflammability of the fuel

the lesser will be its residue and the body ash will be purer. As the electric burning uses no fuel the residue is pure body ashes. By the simple logic the electric cremation gives us most authentic last remains of a dead body.

So, we can assume that it is more in conformity with the *Shastras*. Some die hard orthodox elements can't accept this scientific fact. It is a pity.

Electric cremation is cheaper and time saving as well. In the process we save the trees indirectly. That credit we earn by doing nothing. We have already denuded our forest cover which is a grave sin we have already committed. Electric cremation gives us a chance to redeem ourselves.

Think of the day when only cremation mode available will be electric one. And added advantage of electric cremation is that one can collect the ashes on the same day. In the wood cremation one has to go a day after to do that job.

Let's hope the wisdom of *Shastras* will dawn on the orthodox mind.

WHY FLOUR LAMP FOR THE DEAD?

In Hindu custom according to *Shastras* a lamp made of kneaded flour is filled with ghee and a wick put in. It is called *'Mrit Panati Deepak.'*

The lamp is placed at the spot where the dead person had breathed his last and is lit. The custom is to keep it lit for ten days, the period determined by *Shastras* when the soul remains tied to this world, or the memories of it before it is granted passage to the other world.

The belief is that the lamp helps the dead man's soul find its way to the other world. Some even believe that the traces left in the lamp give clue to the life the deadman's soul has been destined to take birth into.

There is simple logic also. The flour lamp informs the visitors that a death has occurred in this family. It is a clue that the visitor must behave accordingly in tune with the mourning mood of the family.

During old days a lamp was the only source of the light. The *Panati Deepak* tradition kept the room or the house lighted all the time so that the members of the family didn't get scared or imagined ghostly things in the darkness.

After all death is a very scary thing and is related to ghosts and apparitions.

The members of the family naturally get in haunted mood. More so in the Indian families where all kinds of superstitions affect the minds of the simple folk. Hence, we can say that *'Mrit Panati Deepak'* custom has some very logical explanations.

LAMP TRADITION

Lamps with ghee as the fuel is ubiquitous Hindu tradition. During worship, pooja, rites and celebrations lit up lamps are sure to be there. The biggest festival of Hindus is festival of lights, Deepawali.

WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF OIL LAMPS?

Hindu philosophy rationalises that the lamp is the symbol of the human body. Oil is its life force. The

wick is the mind or the heart. The flame is the soul and the light it spreads is spiritual knowledge which leads to Power Supreme. This symbolic message is the basic value of a Hindu and he sees the life in that light.

WHY *KAPAALKRIYA*?

Kapaalkriya is breaking the skull of *dead* body while it burns on the funeral pyre. For this purpose a stick is used to do this.

Shastras order that the stick should be one of the two that form the stretcher on which the dead body is carried in the funeral procession to the cremation ground. The *Kapaalkriya* act is performed by the eldest son of the dead person.

Some people disapprove of this as a macabre act. But according to the religious scholars, the secret of this act lies in the *mantra* that is recited before the act which means—*'Respected father! Had you remained celibate instead of becoming my sire you could have evolved celibacy power that could have enabled your soul to exit from the skull to and attain moksha. Now I pledge to it through the act ordered by Shastras.'*

The reasoning here is based on vague concept. But the scientific logic behind it is more sound that has not been cited. In certain circumstances the burning fire can heat up the skull and the expanding gases inside may cause the skull to explode with unpleasant consequences. The brain matter in that case may spray around creating embarrassing situation.

The danger increases if the dead person was suffering from brain tumour. This custom surely

appears to have been devised after witnessing some such accidents.

The skull is purposely smashed open to prevent the possibility of the explosion. The recital of *mantra* is merely to give the act a religious touch to save the *'Kapaalkriya'* doer from getting the bad feeling.

MISCONCEPTIONS

There are a lot of misconceptions and superstitions that have no logic or reasoning behind them in respect of lending a shoulder to funeral carriage, like not doing it, if one's father is alive or wife is pregnant, or wife is in her monthly period or if one is engaged for marriage etc. These beliefs are products of some idle minds.

There is not such order in *Shastras*.

WHY OBSERVE *DASWAN* (TENTH DAY)?

There is a *Shastras* order that the tenth day of death be specially observed as *Daswan*. Nine days are considered as *Navshradha,* a period when it is believed that the dead man's soul remains bound to his previous earthly life. It tries to understand the world of the after life. It is believed that on the ninth day it understands the norms to enter into the after life phase.

On the tenth day lumps are made symbolising the gods and they are worshiped. A special lump is made for the touch of crow. The logic behind it is not yet revealed. May be, the crow is related to some occult practices, so, it may symbolise some aspect of it. On the 12th day lumps are made on the river bank to represent ancestors. A larger lump representing the dead person

is prepared and small parts from it is added to the other lumps. It is symbolic act of formally accepting the dead one as an ancestor.

WHY ONE YEAR MOURNING PERIOD?

A family mourns for its dead members for one year because it is believed that for that period the soul remains in ghost state. The logic appears to be that the sages thought a dead man's memories linger on for that span of time. As a result the members of the family are not in right frame of mind, at least not all of them. Hence, marriàges and celebrations are forbidden in the family for that period. It also is a way of paying tribute to the departed one.

WHY *SHRADDHAS* OF DEAD ONES?

One of most controversial custom of Hinduism is *Shraddhas,* the rituals done every year in the names of the dead ancestors of the family. Some sarcastic people might scoff at it and make fun of the ritual. But we must be a little generous and say that it is religious way of paying tributes to the departed members of the family.

Our culture teaches respect to the elders. A great stress is laid on the reverence to seniors of the family. This cardinal principle rules the families at cultural level. This value infact is seeded in the society by religion itself because it was the architect of ethical codes, customs and traditions. At religious level the sages extended this reverence of the elders to even the dead ancestors.

It was the psychological fall out of the firm Hindu

belief in rebirths. Most of the mythological stories of the characters gave accounts of the happenings of their previous births. For them a person or a character was compilation of several biographies of lives running back into past. They took ancestors of a person as living entities in soul form who were integral parts of the living person.

By ordering *shraddhas* they wanted the people to treat their ancestors in the same light. At least for once a year a Hindu was obliged to recognise his ancestors as living entities through the rites of the *shraddha*.

Through this rite a person revives the memories of his ancestors and tries to connect to them emotionally to draw inspiration from them and also remember the promises made to them or what their expectations were of him.

After all how many efforts are going on all over the world to find a way to contact the souls of dead persons? There are planechet methods and all kinds of the mediums who claim to possess the powers to help one contact the dead near and dear ones.

Hinduism understood the psychological urges of people to contact their dead ancestors. So, it devised a simple rite to satisfy that urge religiously without resorting to hoax games.

There might be some false additions, to the original customs, made by the vested interests but such insertions can be detected as they carry the ring of artificialness and exploitative intent.

WHY *SHRADDHA* ON *AMAVASYAS*?

Shraddhas are as a rule performed only on

moonless night. There is a simple common sense in it because the rite is for dealing with the spirits. The darkness is the domain of the spirits. The light is the enemy of the spirits and the para world entities.

Ashwin month's descending noon phase is considered *Pitripaksha* when the ancestors can be paid tribute to every day of the fortnight. It is considered to be the fortnight which is like a festival of the spirits of the dead people.

WHY THE RITUALS?

It should be understood that many rituals are merely devised for giving the honour to a specific process, the occasion or the intent. It provides one with a specimen procedure to follow. The procedures create a system and the system is what human beings feel at home with and gain confidence from.

A priest, preferably the family priest performs *shraddha* for his client. Mantra recital ritual follows after putting together the required ingredients. The priest is fed. At the pilgrim centre a professional Brahmin performs the rituals and a number of Brahmins are fed. It is claimed that the food fed to the Brahmins reaches the dead ancestors.

It is too simplistic an explanation that does not convince anyone because it is devised by ill educated greedy priests who have little qualification and intelligence to reveal the symbolic meaning.

For a person who is getting *shraddha* performed for his ancestors will be naturally in a spiritual mood. He does not view things in material ways if he is true to

the ritual. He feeds the Brahmins in the spirit that he is feeding his ancestors whose spirits are manifest in those Brahmins. The contented eating of the Brahmins in just like his forefathers showing satisfactions.

In Brahmin/Brahmins he virtually imagines his ancestors partaking food offered by him. To him the belching of the fed priest is the thanks from his ancestors.

After all this world is a mind game. In *shraddha* the religion is accepting this fact.

WHY OFFER WATER TO SUN?

During the *shraddha* ritual if one is at a pilgrim centre performing it he is made to stand in the holy river at knee deep level and offer water to Sun-god by pouring it from a bowl held at the level of his bent forehead. In domestic *shraddha* the priest asks his client to pour water facing the sun.

By the Brahmins and the priests of shallow knowledge it is explained that by doing so the offered water will reach to his dead ancestors. It was a brazen explanation. The ignorant could accept it meekly. But how would educated and thinking persons take it?

It became a big joke. The entire *shraddha* rite came under fire and utter ridicule. The people began to lose faith in the ritual and it was labeled as yet another fraud of the religion. The priests had no plausible rebuttal. They were too unscientific and too outdated to cope with the cynical problem.

But the practice of offering water to the sun has a very authentic logic.

A man offering water to sun invokes the spirits of his seven generations gone by. The water being poured falls down in a twisting stream which at places gains the properties of a prism and splits the sun rays into seven colours.

Through this act the *shraddha* doer invokes the spirits of his ancestors of seven generations symbolically saying that he is the product of the cumulative effect of the deeds done by them during their life times.

And the sun that contributes the rays in this effort is the father of them all being the life energy of all the living creatures of the earth.

But why seven generations only? Why not more?

Hindu philosophy perhaps here uses mathematical logic. In the decimal system after decimal point we take cognizance of only seven digits. After that the digit's calculative value is so reduced that it does not matter. Even in practical life expression seven generations are quoted. In heated exchanges the quarrelling parties curse seven generations of each other.

Thus, figure of speech too accepts the seven generation theory that has the mathematical logic.

In the *shraddha* performance the fees and goodies prescribed for the *Brahmin* priests is debatable because here comes the greed and exploitative element our customs or rites suffer from. The possibilities of false insertions in the order can not be ruled out.

If due to shortage of money one is not able to perform *shraddha* there is an alternate route provided by the *Shastras*. In such helpless situation the order is

to come out of the house and say following prayer facing south—*'Na May Asti Vitam Na Dhanam Na Chanyat Shraddhopyog Swapivrita Na Toasmi, Triptyantuphaktya Pitran Mayaite Bhujo Krito Vartasmi Marutasya.'*

Meaning : 'I have no money. Nor can I afford the rite material. But with true dedication I pay obeisance to my forefathers. Let my ancestors be pleased with my respect to them. So, I spread my arms sky wards.'

Raise your hands upwards flailing them to express helplessness. Shake you head in regret. It is the sentiment and the honest thought that really matters, and not the formal rituals. After all you are the dear one of those who you are trying to connect with.

Shastra also have orders on various types of *shraddhas* namely *Bharani Shraddha, Mahalaya Shraddha, Avidhwa Navami Shraddha* and *Apghati Shraddha.*

FOR MISSING PERSONS

If a person has gone missing what to do about his last rites and *shraddha?*

Shastras order that in case of a missing person his return should be awaited for 12 years. This ruling is in case of the natural calamities. After twelve years the last rites may be performed using a mud lump to represent the missing person. After one year from that point *shraddha* may be regularly performed.

WHY IMPURITY PERIODS—*ASHAUCH?*

Hindu *Shastras* have defined certain conditions

where a person can be in the state of impurity physically, mentally, psychologically, hygeinically or spiritually where contact with other persons or partaking of food or drinks or dealing with others should be avoided. A proper clean up or purification is required to return to the normal state of life.

Shastras describe such periods or states as *Ashauch* which literally means 'unclean'.

Eight major impurity periods are—1. Before bath, 2. After answering nature's call, 3. After sex, 4. After hair cut, 5. After contacting a person in impure state, 6. After the maternity, 7. After attending a funeral or death of a relative, 8. After falling in menstruation period in case of a woman.

A quick look reveals that above states have been determined as impure because of hygienic reasons or psychological considerations.

After answering the nature's call, hair cut, sex and after attending a funeral one naturally feels some uncleanliness and the tendency is to take a bath or a shower. For the same reason the toilets have elaborate washing facilities.

The debate arises over the periods *Shastras* determine for a person to be in untouchable state when he is not permitted to do worship, go to temple or do cooking or get into physical contact with others.

WHY MATERNITY UNTOUCHABILITY?

If a women gives birth to a child the order is that the members of her family become unfit to attend weddings, *yajnas* or other auspicious occasion

celebrations. Different periods of untouchability are prescribed for births of boy baby or girl baby.

WHAT IS THE LOGIC BEHIND THIS?

Apparently the reason appears to be the protection of the mother and the new born. Both of them are in a very tender state of physical health. The mother has a weakened immune systems and defence mechanisms after going through the ordeal of labour pains. The newborn is also a very tender whose immune systems are yet to be fully awakened. Both are prone to contracting viral diseases or infections.

Her relatives are naturally going to touch the baby and the mother when they will come to visit them. The newborn is going to be fondled by all the members of the family.

If any member of the family is carrying infectious virus it does not pose big danger because he or she is already in the family and is in contact with the mother for a long time. So, the mother's system is already familiar with that virus and we can assume that antibodies to that are already there on guard in the mother's body.

The danger would arise when unfamiliar virus arrives and infects the mother or the baby.

Perhaps to avoid that this untouchability order has been devised. Through this custom the member of the family and the relatives of the mother and the child are being quarantined to safeguard them.

The Hindu sages may not have thought it in the medical terminology as we have done here. They must

have some vague idea and seen things happen to gain them experience to work in the right precautionary direction.

WHY DEATH UNTOUCHABILITY?

Similarly a ten day untouchability period is prescribed for persons in whose family a death has occurred. Here simple reasoning is at work. The person could have died of some viral disease and the family members may be carrying some viruses. So, they are put in untouchability period for the safety of the others. There is one more logic to justify it. Where death occurs the numbers of that family will be in the mourning and some of them are likely to be in shocked state of grief. In such a state one does not know what he or she is doing or touching or eating. A person is in an unhealthy frame of mind. Making such a person untouchable is a precautionary measure.

WHY WOMEN IN PERIODS ARE UNTOUCHABLE?

Menstruation is a very feminine biological reaction or body functioning. It awakens her gender sense and charges her with femininity. She is no more a person but a woman. Her feminine feelings keep swathing her.

Naturally she is in a delicate frame of mind and touchy. She can be easily provoked or gets irritated. *Shastra* has ordered that a woman in her periods should not cook food. This ruling provides her a much needed relief from work. Otherwise working in the kitchen is a

daily grind for an Indian woman. It is like *Shastras* granted her 'Menstruation leave' on the lines of the modern 'Maternity leave'.

Her quarantine is obviously to keep her away from the crowds and celebrations where she is likely to come into contact with the members of the opposite sex which might not be healthy with her gender sense on the full alert.

FINAL WORDS

It all goes to prove that the orders of our *Shastras* have sound reasoning and scientific logic in most of the cases. A careful analysis reveals ever newer angles of facts which make perfect sense.

But it requires to be done with caution.

Justifying every order on some pretext or the other would be stretching things too far. Several *Vedic* reformist movements committed that mistake and eventually lost all credibility and the following. Ultimately they began to sound like orthodox priests playing the same old beaten tune on an imported electric guitar.

We only selected items which to us made sense in a very natural way without being forced to invent scientific fantasies in the name of scientific logic and reason.

The reader would agree that we have made an honest effort in our rationalisation of our customs, traditions and rituals without resorting to cultural, racial and religious chauvinism.

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APPENDIX

WHY WATER IS OFFERED TO SUN?

In the chapter dealing with *Sharddhas* we have already disclosed how water offered by pouring to sun gets split in seven colours due to chance prism effect. It symbolises the seven preceding generations or some other seven fold aspect of life.

On mythical format the sun is one of the five prime deities. Sun is the Lord of the planets. It is the main source of life energy on the earth. In that sense the Sun is the Father Supreme of all the living creatures and the plants on earth.

In Hindu culture offering water is symbolic gesture of showing extreme reverence. It balances the life energies of biological systems.

Shastras rule that while offering water all the names of the sun must be pronounced as prescribed through the respective *mantra*.

The water must be offered to the sun by pouring it down from the forehead height from a copper bowl facing the sun which means eastwards in the morning and westwards in the evening. The prism effect is the symbolic acceptance of the fact that the sunlight is what that fills all colours in our lives. Some even believe that the sun rays destroy harmful germs or bacteria on a person.

Ayurveda believes that offering water to the sun improves the eyesight because the myth is that the Sun is the god of eyes or eyesight.

WHY GANGA WATER IS SACRED?

According to the *Puranic* belief Ganga is born out of the toe of Lord Vishnu, so, it is the feet-nectar of the Lord. *Shastras* rule thus—

Akaal Mrityu harnam, Sarvavyadhi Vinashanam, Vishnocharnodakam peetwa Punarjanma na Labhyate

Meaning : *It keeps untimely death away, it destroys all diseases, one who drinks this feet-nectar of Vishnu attains Nirvana.*

According to the mythology King Bhagiratha had brought Ganga down to serve the earth from the heavens. The priests hold the belief that the Ganga water is incontaminable. Keep Ganga water in a bottle for any length of time and it won't grow germs or worms. The reasoning is that in its course down the hills Ganga gets treated with immunising minerals and herbs. So, it becomes contamination-proof body of water.

But this claim has not been able to get the certification of the scientists as a fact. Many sceptic scientists even mock at the claim. But no one can deny the fact that Ganga is revered as no other river in the world is. Even as a river what it gives to Indian people in respect of the water needs for the daily life and the agriculture is nothing short of a divine miracle.

WHY *KALASHA* IS SIGN OF GOOD?

Varuna, the water-god and *Agni,* the fire-god are

considered to be witness-deities whose presence in the solemn religious ceremonies are required as a must. The symbol of *Varuna* is a pitcher or *Kalasha* (Grail or flaggon), the container for water. A clay pitcher is the poor man's grail.

The clay pitcher reminds one of *Krishna's* divine pranks of butter stealing or pelting stones at the pitchers of milkmaids. Vishnu as *Mohini* had distributed the divine nectar among gods and demons from a divine flaggon. And *Kalasha* reminds one of the steeple of temples.

Hence, the very sight of *Kalasha* is considered by *Shastras* as rewarding as the sighting of a deity. While worshiping *Kalasha,* the priest recites a *mantra* and touches various points of *Kalasha.* The *mantra* announces how various parts of *Kalasha* represent various god powers, energies, holy things and divine knowledges.

Note : As a result of the churning of the seas by the gods and demons, a grail *(Kalasha)* full of divine nectar had emerged from the waters as the prime prize of the endeavour.

WHY *SHANI* IDOL IS OINTED WITH OIL?

Astrology *shastras* prescribe ointing of *Shani* idol made of iron with oil (Mustard) to pacify the fierce deity symbolised by the planet Saturn.

The mythical story—*Shani* (Saturn) god's harmful spell was to begin over Hanumana when the latter was busy in the construction of the stone bridge over the sea to take across the monkey army of Lord Rama to

Lanka, the island kingdom of Ravana, the villain of Ramayana. There always was the danger of the demons damaging the bridge. So, the charge of the safety of the bridge was given to the mighty Hanumana. *Shani* knew the incredible physical and the para-powers of Hanumana.

He explained to Hanumana how he would have to cast a bad spell on the latter as his duty in accordance with the rules of the planetary configurations set by the nature.

Hanumana pleaded that he did not want to go against the laws of the nature but needed a short waiver to enable him to see through safely the construction of the bridge to dedicate it in the service of Lord Rama.

Shani rejected the request for the waiver.

So, *Shani* in the form of a bad spell possessed Hanumana. Hanumana retaliated by banging his body against the rocky mountains. It hurt *Shani* as he was in possession of the body of Hanumana.

To save himself from any further hurt he apologized to Hanumana and promised that he would never again trouble any devotee of Rama. Hanumana relented and gave *Shani* mustard oil for application as a balm on his beaten and bruised body.

It helped and *Shani* felt relief from pain. It started the custom of offering oil to *Shani* god.

There is a scientifie explanation to it as well. *Shani* idols are made of iron as per the order of *Shastra.* Iron is very prone to corrosion by rusting. But the application of oil protects it by serving as a barrier against water or moisture which sets off the rusting

process in iron. It was, after all, the original paint to prevent the corrosion.

WHY RED VERMILLION FOR HANUMANA?

Red is the sign of the heated state of a ferrous metal. It is the symbol of live energy and ire. According to Hindu mythological belief, *Mangala* (Mars) is the commander-in-chief of god army. And Mars is also known as the red planet. So, by this connection also red is the symbol of power or force or valour.

Hanumana is painted red with vermillion as he is the embodiment of power and valour. Women also apply red vermillion in the parting of their hair as a tribute of their husbands. By tradition for a woman her husband is the symbol of power and the valour of a warrior. For the same reason a groom sets out to his bride on a horse in warrior dress for the wedding ceremony.

Mythological story is that once while applying vermillion Sita explained to Hanumana that it was the symbolic act to manifest her devotion to her husband Lord Rama. Hanumana thought over it and went to Lord Rama's court with his body painted red with vermillion. He wanted to convey that his entire self was nothing but devotion to Lord Rama.

Sita explained this sentiment to Lord Rama who was at first puzzled.

Thus, application of red vermillion to Hanumana became a symbolic custom started off by that story.

WHY FIVE GREEN PILLARS IN A WEDDING?

Five green pillars are installed on a wedding altar

Hindu marriage ceremony. Five is the most holy figure in Hindu religion. We are the products of the five elements. Five gods are prescribed for daily worship. Five things make *Panchamrita,* the holy nectar. Five members make *Panchayata* etc. Wedding pillars are also in confirmity to that five rule.

The green pillars symbolise nature's colour of life and bloom. The marriage is supposed to bloom and prosper. An evergreen bliss is wished for symbolically. It is made more expressive by decorating the pillars profusely with green leaves and fruits.

The union is blessed to fructify.

As pillars banana plant and bamboo, both are accepted. Banana fructifies when it is transplanted just as the bride is transplanted in another family to maritally fructify. Bamboo prospers when it stays rooted at one place just like the groom.

The green ambiance is the symbolic presence of the nature because a marriage is itself an act to meet the demand of the very basic nature of life.

WHY *MUNDANA*?

On several occasions Hindus ceremoniously clean shave heads. At a certain age—a child goes through *mundan* (clean shaving of the head) ceremony—Priests and monks are ordered to have clean shaved heads. In older times all the students were required to have clean shaven heads.

So was in the case of the celebates.

In case of the death in a family the male members are ordered by *shastra* to shave off their heads. While

becoming ascetics the hair is shorn off. So is in the case of one setting out on *Vanprastha ashram.*

In some temples even women shave off their hair to offer it to the deity.

It is common sight at Tirupati Balaji temple. It is called 'Beauty offering.'

In Bengal windows keep clean shaven heads. It is for not remaining femininely beautiful.

In ancient times cleaning hair was a problem. Then soaps or shampoos had not been invented. The hair easily got messy or matty in absence of proper cleaning aids. Hence, in bygone era getting rid of hair was the easiest way to keep clean.

WHY MOON WORSHIP ON *KARVA CHAUTH*?

On *Karva Chauth* day the women keep fast and at moon rise time go to the roof to worship the moon for the long life of their husbands. The same day is celebrated as Lord Shiva Family worship. Shiva's wife goddess Parvati is considered to be the symbol of eternal marital bliss. In every incarnation she gets married to Shiva. Through moon, the wives invoke *Parvati* to bless them also the same marital bliss she herself enjoys. Moon is symbolically pictured as the adornment of Lord Shiva's hair.

The moon also is the god of medicines which indirectly means the blesser of the health and consequently the long life.

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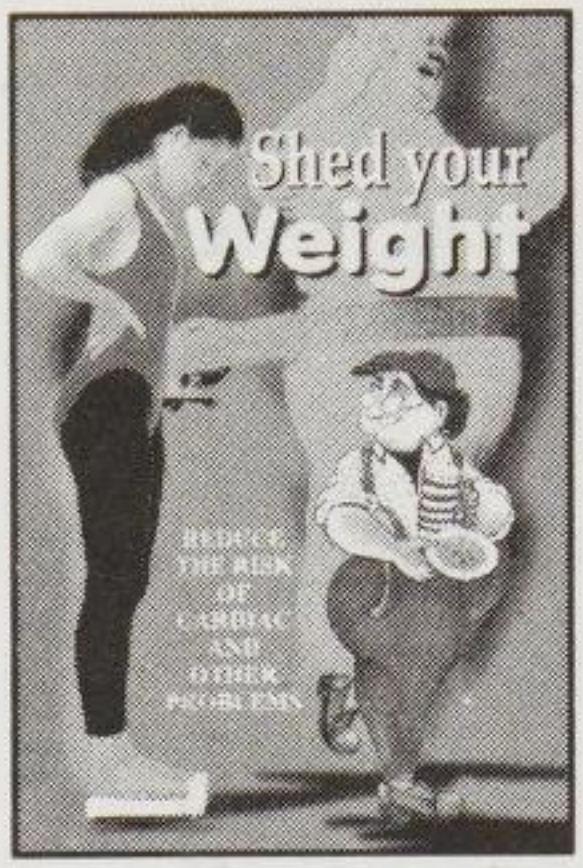

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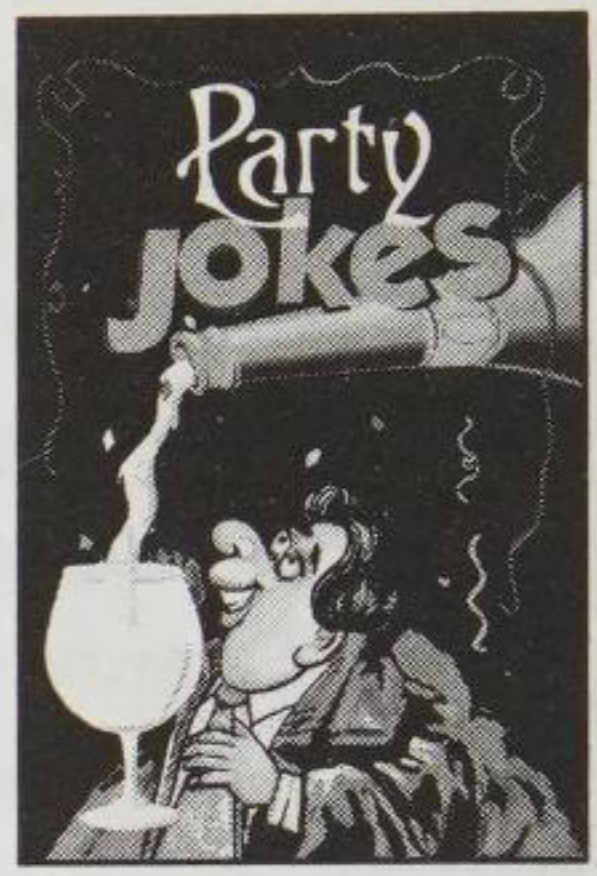

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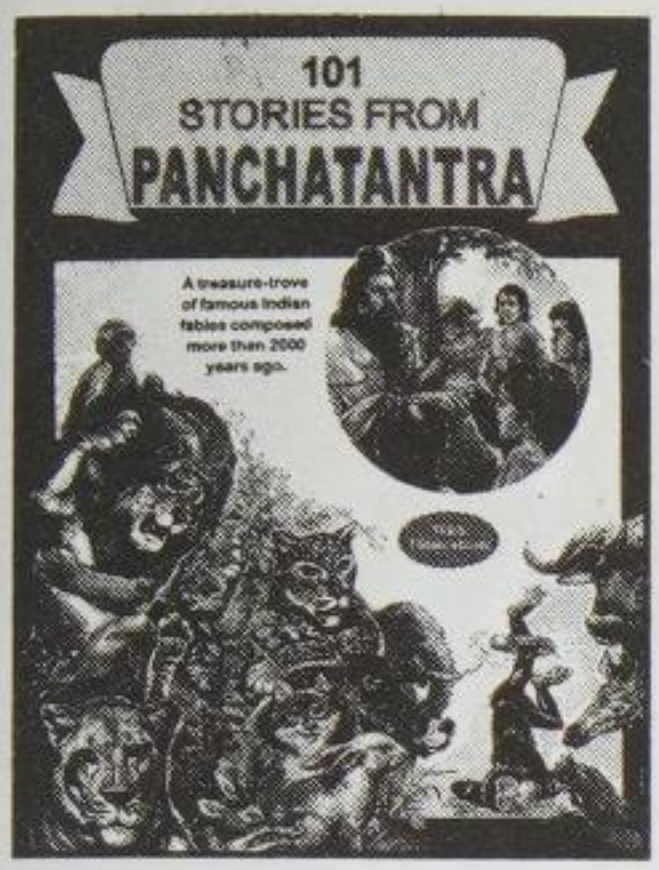

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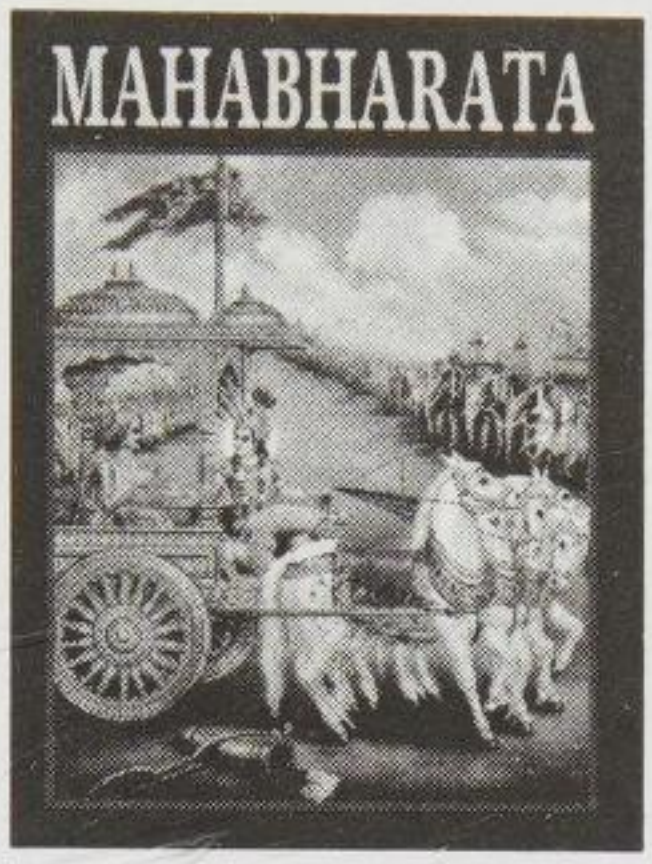

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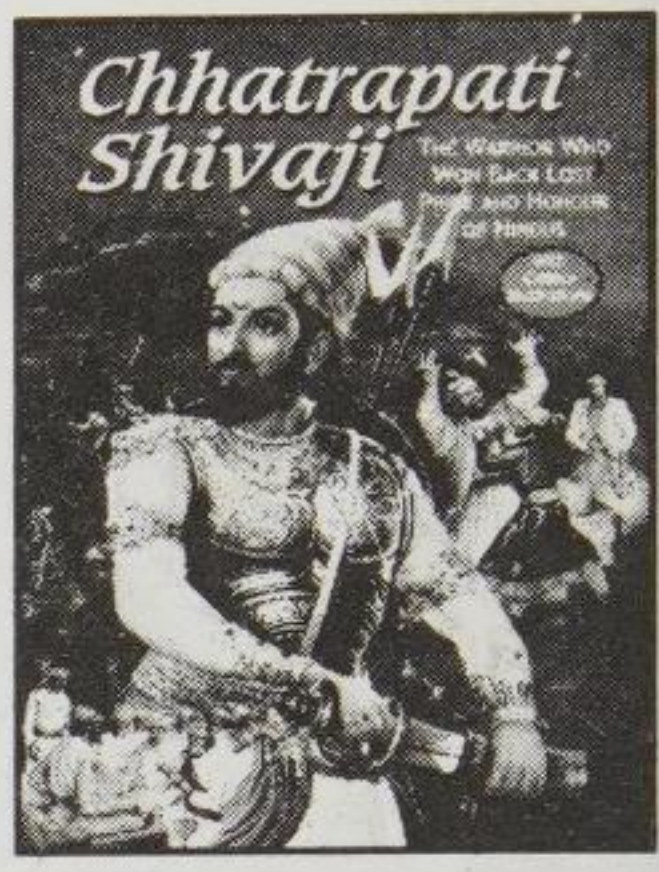

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